

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

JUNE 1996

CINDERS

The dead man wasn't
dead—or was he?

by PATRICK IRELAN

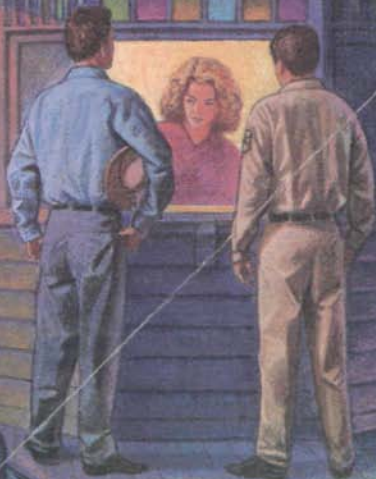
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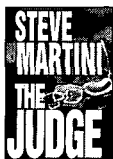
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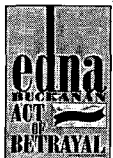
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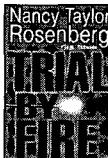
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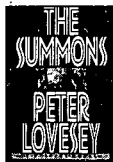
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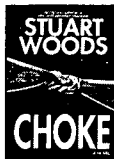
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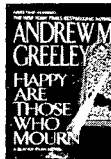
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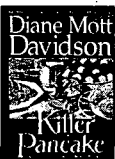
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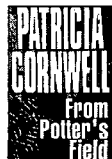
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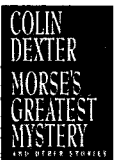
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 41, No. 6, June, 1996. Published monthly except for a March/April double issue by Dell Magazines, Inc. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$43.45 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3311 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1996 by Dell Magazines, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

ISSN:0002-5224.

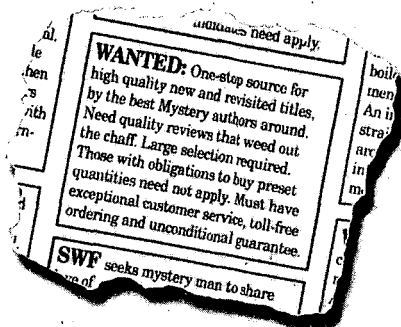
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We are pleased to welcome two authors new to AHMM in this issue.

Donna Hill, author of "Trouble Next Door," her first mystery short story, is the former head of the Education Library at Hunter College in New York, holds the title of professor emeritus, and now writes full time. To date, her publications, for both adults and young people, include three novels, a number of short stories, and a biography of Mormon leader Joseph Smith. She was a code clerk in the American Embassy in Paris for two years while studying art, painting, and exhibiting and has traveled quite a bit, most recently to the then USSR in 1988 and to Spain in 1993.

One of Professor Hill's novels is a mystery, *Murder Uptown*,

published in 1992 by Carroll & Graf. She tells us that she began writing in high school in Washington, D.C., and at sixteen "won a local radio 'fish story' contest with prize money enough to buy a bicycle." In 1994 the University of Utah, Marriott Library, established the Donna Hill Collection of manuscripts and other papers.

John M. Floyd, author of "Teamwork," is a former captain in the U.S. Air Force and a marketing specialist for IBM, where he has spent the past twenty-five years. "My travels with IBM," he says, "have taken me to forty-four states and seven countries." Mr. Floyd has published a number of poems and short stories in the past year or so; one story won first place in the Fall 1994 issue of *Anterior Fiction Quarterly*.

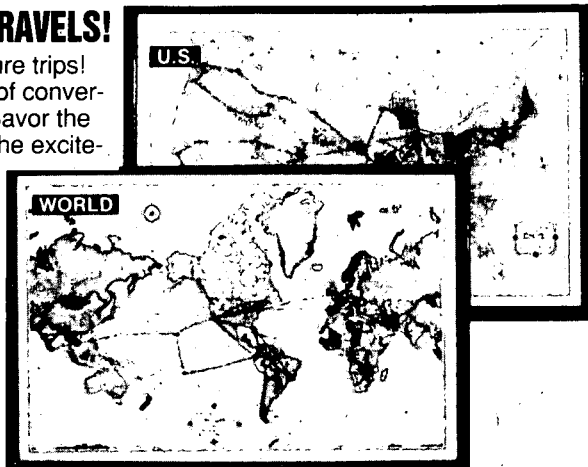
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FICTION

Cinders

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Jason Price took a plate out of the cupboard and threw it on the floor. It hit with a loud crash and broke apart. He reached back into the cupboard, pulled out a water glass, and threw it on the floor. The glass shattered with an explosive sound that Jason found more satisfying than the sound of the plate. This was fun. This was a treat. He'd always wanted to do something like this, and now he had an excuse.

He turned back to the cupboard and, in succession, broke a cup, a saucer, a cream pitcher, and a serving dish. He was enjoying himself so much that he wanted to break every dish in the house, but he knew that that wouldn't look right. So he contented himself with kicking over a couple of chairs and upsetting the kitchen table.

Jason looked around the room. He wondered if he'd overdone it but decided not to worry. Only one more pleasure awaited him. He went down to the basement and returned with a hammer and a pair of work gloves. He put on the gloves and walked out the front door, locking it behind him. It was getting dark out, and the clouds would hide the moon. No one was anywhere in sight. Holding the hammer like a sword, he broke out the beveled glass in the door. Then he reached through the broken

window, found it easy to unlock the door, and went back inside.

He quickly returned the hammer and gloves to the basement, then returned to the front door and looked out. Still no one in sight. He didn't expect anyone until the next day. By then it wouldn't matter. Taking a suitcase, he walked out of the house, leaving the door wide open.

Opening the garage door, he backed his car out. His white clapboard cottage stood in the country two miles north of Clearfield. The house couldn't be seen from the road. It sat in a grove of trees at the end of a winding lane. Jason drove down the lane and turned north onto Highway 63. It started to rain, gently at first, then harder. He hadn't planned on this, but it probably didn't make any difference.

He drove fifteen miles to Garrison Falls, staying below the speed limit all the way. On the south side of town he drove past an abandoned factory and the John Deere plant. In the distance, the remnants of the packing plant loomed in the rain, its brick buildings a reminder of a more prosperous past, a past that Jason was too young to remember.

He pulled off the highway and took the viaduct over the Des Moines River. Downstream on the right, an ancient steel-truss

railroad bridge spanned the river. Upstream, cars and trucks were crossing the Market Street Bridge. Beyond that, the old hydroelectric plant quietly did its work.

Jason turned left on Second Street and drove past the Art Deco newspaper office; past struggling businesses; past vacant stores, an abandoned bakery, and blocks of rundown houses. On Route 23 west of town he turned left onto a gravel road, drove a hundred yards, crossed the Burlington Northern railroad tracks, and stopped where the road stopped, at the riverbank. He turned off the lights. A field of corn hid him from the highway. No one had seen him drive down the gravel road. No one would see him leave.

He turned off the engine and put the clutch in neutral. Then he grabbed the suitcase, got out of the car, and quietly closed the door. He looked around, just to make sure he was alone, then laughed silently to himself. This was going to be as much fun as breaking dishes. He walked to the back of the car and pushed.

It didn't take much effort. The car was already on an incline. It began to roll forward, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Jason stopped and watched it roll away from him. It hit the water with a satisfying splash, send-

ing a series of concentric waves out across the river. The car sank slowly, made a final succession of gurgles, and disappeared beneath the water. Jason looked up at the sky and smiled happily. The rain had stopped, and the moon was coming out. He looked one last time at the river, which was already flowing with barely a ripple over the top of his car. Then he turned and walked away.

As soon as Adcock hung up the phone, Sherry Marino came through the door. She was young, short, and cute, with a turned-up nose and eyes as black as Iowa topsoil. "Sheriff," she said, "Sheriff Hill's office called while you were on the other line. A couple of boys found Jason Price's car in the river west of Garrison Falls. Here's how to find the place." She handed him a piece of paper.

Adcock looked at the paper and scratched his neck. "Anything in the car?" he asked, looking up at Sherry.

"They didn't mention anything."

Adcock nodded. "Tell Jim I want him to go with me. Kevin can guard the county until we get back. Ask him to call Frank Martin. I want to know if Price was involved in anything unusual at the bank."

Adcock stood up and put on his hat. He wore black shoes, gray work pants, a blue shirt, and a badge. His hair was flecked with gray but was otherwise just as dark as Sherry's. He was tall and lean, and only the lines on his face revealed his sixty years. He didn't carry a pistol, although he always kept a shotgun in the car. You never knew when a bad duck might fly past.

Deputy Jim Foley was waiting for him beside Sherry's desk. He was almost as tall as Adcock and almost forty years younger. They walked down the stairs and out the east door of the Fox County Courthouse, a two story limestone building erected in the Second Empire style. The morning sun reflected off the slate shingles of the mansard roof. Blind Justice stood atop the clock tower, facing east toward Rome. "You can drive," Adcock said.

They headed north. Beyond the sale barn at the edge of town, a red combine was chewing its way through a cornfield. Everyone was predicting a record harvest, which would drive down the price of grain, making it even harder for farmers to make a profit.

The drive to Garrison Falls took twenty minutes. As they crossed the viaduct over the Des Moines River, Adcock pointed at the railroad bridge downstream.

"Did I ever tell you about the time my cousin drove a steam locomotive into the river down there?"

"I don't think so, sheriff," Foley said.

"He never was quite right after that."

"Now, John, you can see right over here that Price's car was the last one to come down this road last night." Sheriff Marvin Hill pointed at the car tracks in the dried mud, and Adcock nodded agreeably. "The tread looks just like the tread on those tires." He pointed back at Price's car, which was dripping mud and water on the riverbank.

"And there was no one in the car," Adcock said.

"Not a soul."

"So the person who drove the car here either walked away or swam away."

"Unless he drowned trying to get out, in which case the body is probably still in the river." Hill scratched his chest. He had thick arms and a fat belly.

"Was the door open when you pulled the car out?"

"No, but the keys were still in the ignition."

"Was the car in gear?"

"No, in neutral." Both men stared at the car for a moment. "So who do you think did it?" Hill asked.

Adcock looked at him. "The

same person who wrecked Price's house and left him dead on the floor."

Adcock and Foley walked back down the road toward where the car stood beyond a police barricade. One of Sheriff Hill's deputies stood beside the barricade, a bored expression on his face. When Adcock reached the Burlington Northern railroad crossing, he stopped and looked down the tracks to the east. "Do you know where these tracks go?" he asked Foley.

"Probably into Garrison Falls," Foley said.

"That's right. If you wanted to walk out of here without being seen, would you go back to the highway or down the tracks?"

"I see what you mean."

"You know where else these tracks go?"

"Not exactly."

"Straight to the Amtrak depot. Unless I'm mistaken, the west-bound California Zephyr stops there every night. What do you think?"

"It would be a good way to get out of town."

"Especially if you'd just left your car in the river."

Foley parked in the lot east of the two story limestone depot. It was newer than most stations on this line. The Burlington railroad had constructed it right af-

ter World War II while still under the influence of the passenger-train boom created by the war. That boom was now history. Appropriately, the second floor of the depot was now used for a local history museum.

The Burlington Northern tracks passed along the south side of the depot. On the north side, a venerable steam locomotive stood on display behind a chain-link fence, a relic of a time before freeways and drive-by shootings. Adcock and Foley walked along the concrete station platform and into the waiting room. The room still contained its original tubular-steel furniture, much of which was in need of immediate repair.

The ticket clerk stood behind the counter, which curved from one wall to the next in the southwest corner of the waiting room. She was about thirty, pretty but not beautiful, with curly blonde hair. No one else was around.

Adcock went over to the ticket window and leaned against the counter. The clerk looked at his face, then at his badge, then back at his face. "May I help you?" she said.

"I'm John Adcock, sheriff of Fox County," he said, "and this is Deputy Foley." He gestured toward Foley with a nod of his head.

The clerk's eyes turned to-

ward Foley, lingered on his handsome face a little longer than necessary, and looked back at Adcock. "How can I help you?" she asked.

"We're investigating the murder of Jason Price. You may have heard about it." The woman nodded. "Someone found his car in the river west of here, not far from the Burlington Northern tracks. We don't know who put it there, but we're considering the possibility that whoever it was could have walked into town along the tracks. He might even have caught a train here. Were you on duty last night?"

"Yes, I was. I work a split shift so I can be here for both trains." The woman looked at Foley again, and back at Adcock.

"Did you have any customers?"

Foley had his pad and pen out, ready to take notes.

"Yes, there were two women and a man. And a man and woman with two little girls, but they already had their tickets."

"Were the two women and the man together?"

"No, the two women were together. The man came later. The women bought tickets to Omaha."

"And the man?"

"Denver."

"How old were the women?"

"Elderly. They didn't look like murderers."

"What about the man?"

"He didn't look like a murderer either."

"What did he look like?"

"He was about thirty-five, brown hair, tall. He had a mustache."

"Goodlooking?"

The woman glanced at Foley again. "Yes."

"Glasses?"

"No."

"Fat? Thin?"

"Thin."

"Short hair?"

"Yes."

"Did he look like he'd been out in the rain?"

"He was a little wet but not soaked."

"Were his shoes muddy?"

The woman paused. "I think so."

"Did you see him get on the train?"

The woman thought about this. "I guess I didn't really see him get on. He went outside with the others when the train got here, but I can't swear that he got on."

"All right," Adcock said. "The only other thing we need is your name."

"Karen Hauser."

"Thank you, Karen. You've been very helpful. If you think of anything else, give us a call."

"Do you think the man I saw was the killer?" She looked worried.

"I don't know. That's what we have to find out."

Foley drove back across the viaduct and turned toward Clearfield. The air was crisp, the sky blue. The combines were at work on the rich bottom land south of town. On the hillside above the valley, a gust of wind sent a storm of oak and maple leaves across the road. "Let's take another look at Price's house," Adcock said.

They drove through the hills south of Garrison Falls, crossed Soap Creek, and in fifteen minutes arrived at Price's white cottage. Agents from the Division of Criminal Investigation were hard at work with cameras, tweezers, and dusting powder. The body had already been hauled off to the morgue to await autopsy by Dr. Finney, the county medical examiner.

Adcock and Foley walked through the cottage, trying to stay out of the way. Someone, presumably the killer, had opened every drawer in the house and dumped the contents on the floor. Price's coin collection was gone. A computer desk stood in one room but without its computer. No one knew what else might be missing.

Adcock and Foley went into the kitchen. A chalk outline on the floor showed where the body had been found. Broken dishes

still littered the room. "Look at this mess," Adcock said to Foley. "What does it tell you?"

"Price put up a good fight before someone killed him," Foley said.

"I wonder. Look at the broken dishes. It looks as if Price set the table for supper last night before he got killed. But if he did, why wasn't there any food on the stove?"

"Maybe he hadn't gotten around to it yet."

"Or maybe someone just wanted us to think there was a fight. Maybe there was no fight at all."

"But why?"

"I don't know."

They went back to the entryway, where Adcock spoke to one of the DCI agents. "Have you dusted this phone yet?"

"Yes, I have. Go ahead and use it."

Adcock picked up the phone and called Deputy Hunter. "Kevin," he said, "did you talk to Frank Martin?"

"Yes. He'll call you from the bank as soon as he gets back. He was at his cabin for the weekend."

"Too bad. There's nothing like a murder to spoil your fun."

"Sherry, I'm going to get something to eat. If Martin calls, tell him I'll be back soon."

"Okay, sheriff."

Adcock left the courthouse, walked down the sidewalk, and crossed the street to the east side of the town square. The old two and three story brick buildings on the square were locked in battle with age and economics. The Chamber of Commerce was hoping for an army of tourists, but barely a platoon had arrived so far.

Adcock was crossing the sidewalk toward the Royal Cafe when he heard the sound of glass breaking in a tavern a few doors away. As he trotted down the sidewalk, he heard shouting and more glass breaking. He reached the tavern and went through the door.

The place looked like every other honky-tonk in the state—cheap barstools arrayed along a battered bar, dark wooden booths, rickety tables, yellowed walls, clouds of cigarette smoke. Only the poor lighting kept it from looking worse.

But at this moment the patrons weren't thinking about the decor. They were watching a big man and an average-sized man swinging their fists at each other. Neither was doing much damage to the other, but they had managed to knock over a couple of tables.

"Hold it!" Adcock shouted.

The two men stopped and looked at Adcock. "Sorry, sheriff," the smaller one said, "but he

started it." The man backed away. Behind the bar, the bartender said something into the phone, then hung up.

The big man stayed where he was. He had once had a muscular build but was now running to flab. His round face concealed no untapped intellect. His small eyes squinted beneath tangled brows. His nose was as big as a shot glass.

The big man looked at Adcock and smirked. What he saw was an old man in gray work pants and a blue shirt. The badge didn't impress him. "Who are you?" he said. "The meter maid?"

Everyone from Fox County knew that Adcock had once been an amateur boxing champion. The big man wasn't from Fox County, but he would soon get a history lesson. The other customers exchanged nods and grins. The main event was about to start.

The man stepped toward the sheriff and took a swing. He missed. Adcock didn't. He delivered two left jabs to the nose and a hard right to the belly, and the big man sat down on the floor. He leaned back against the bar, holding his face with one hand and his stomach with the other. He accompanied this show of dexterity with a long, low moan.

Adcock was rubbing the knuckles of his left hand when

Hunter and Foley burst through the door, followed by two city cops in blue uniforms. One was Chief of Police Thomas Stocker. The other was Patrolman Charles Janashek. Foley, Hunter, and Janashek grabbed the big man and gently dragged him out the door.

Adcock and Stocker talked to the bartender and the locals, took some notes, and left together. They stopped on the sidewalk, and Chief Stocker assumed a stern tone. "John," he said, "you shouldn't have gone in there alone. You're not thirty years old any more."

"You're right, but you're not thirty either. What would you have done?"

Stocker thought for a moment, the tension going out of his face. A smile played at the corners of his mouth. "I would have waited for you," he said, "just like I always have."

Adcock finally made it to the Royal Cafe. Forty-five minutes later, he walked back into the office. "Sheriff," Foley said, "look what we found in that guy's pockets."

Adcock looked at the objects laid out on a table: a wallet, a pocket knife, a set of keys, a dirty handkerchief, a dirty comb, and a handful of coins. It was the coins that caught his attention. Among the pennies,

nickels, dimes, and quarters were a number of antique coins of various denominations. "My my my," Adcock said. "Isn't this a surprise?"

"Sure is. Jason Price had a coin collection. A big one."

"So he did."

"I don't know where this guy found them, but it wasn't in a change machine."

"What's his name?"

"Dale Foster from Saint Joseph, Missouri. That's what his driver's license says, anyway."

"Let's bring him upstairs. I want to talk to him about his buffalo nickels."

Adcock sat down across the small wooden table from Foster. The table was so old that it might have come with the courthouse, which had been erected in 1877. The room was small and windowless, a reminder to suspects of what a prison cell would be like. The only light came from an overhead bulb.

Foley and Hunter stood behind Foster, just so he wouldn't get lonely. Hunter was shorter than Foley but more muscular, a good man to have around if an outlaw wanted a wrestling match. "Foster," Adcock said, "they tell me you're from Saint Joe."

"Yeah," Foster said. His nose had stopped bleeding.

"Just like Jesse James."

Foster sneered. "Yeah, just like Jesse James."

"What are you doing in Iowa?"

"I want a cigarette."

"This is a smoke-free environment, Foster. We're trying to protect your health. What are you doing in Iowa?"

"Fishing."

"The fishing isn't good this fall. You should've stayed in Missouri."

"Maybe."

"Maybe you were fishing for something else." Adcock spread a pile of old coins on the table. "Something like this."

"A handful of change?"

"It's not just change, Foster. These coins are old. They're worth a lot of money to a collector. How did you happen to have them in your jeans?"

"I bought them."

"Where?"

"From a guy at a bar in Garrison Falls."

"What's his name and where does he live?"

"I don't know."

"What bar?"

"I don't remember."

"I'll bet you don't. I don't think you bought these coins at all. I think you stole them from Jason Price."

"Never heard of him."

A knock sounded at the door. Foley walked over and opened it, took a piece of paper from Sherry, and brought it back to

the sheriff. Adcock looked at the paper for a few moments, then folded it and put it into his shirt pocket. "Lieutenant Hoffman in Saint Joe just returned my call," he said. "I believe you've met."

"I've met him."

"He says you've been arrested for burglary four times and convicted twice."

"What difference does that make? I've been fishing."

"Foster, we need to get into your van. I want to make sure you haven't caught too many fish."

"What van?"

"The one with Missouri license plates, the one parked in front of the bar where you started a fight."

"It's not mine."

"Hoffman says it's yours."

"He's crazy. He's out to get me."

"Looks like he succeeded. You can either give me permission to search the van or I'll get a warrant. What do you say?"

He said no. The sheriff sent him back downstairs, wrote an affidavit, and gave it to Sherry. She typed it, and Adcock went to find a judge.

Foley unlocked the door to the van and opened it. Hunter whistled. Foster had collected some of the nicest electronic equipment north of St. Joe. Jesse James would have been im-

pressed, although his taste ran more to large bags of cash.

Adcock climbed into the van and poked around among the color television sets, videocassette recorders, and compact disc players. One thing in particular caught his attention. "Remember the missing computer at Price's house?" he said.

"Yes," Foley said.

"I think we just found it," Foley looked past him at the Macintosh computer, complete with color monitor, keyboard, hard drive, and laser printer. "Let's take it inside and plug it in."

They carried the computer up to the office and turned it on. Adcock first tried "Price" as the password. Then he tried "Jason," and the computer opened the window to all its secrets. "People have so much imagination," he said. He tried the first file he saw, which turned out to be a letter to Marilyn Price from her cousin Jason. "Let's get Foster up here again," he said. "Now I need to talk to him about spreadsheets."

"Foster, we just searched your van. Guess what?"

"What?"

"We didn't find any fishing equipment at all. You're going to need a rod and reel if you hope to catch anything up here. These Iowa fish are pretty smart. They

won't just jump into your pocket."

"Is that so?"

"You know what I did find?"

"I give up."

"All kinds of expensive electronic equipment, just the kind of stuff you can sell in a pawnshop any day of the week. One thing we noticed right away was a computer. We brought it upstairs and turned it on, and you know what? It was Jason Price's."

Foster began to look worried. "I found it," he said.

"And I know where. In Price's house. Unfortunately, he must have been home at the time, which is why you killed him."

"What?"

"You heard me. You killed him. You shot him in the head and drove his car into the Des Moines River west of Garrison Falls. I see it as first-degree murder, which means a mandatory sentence of life in prison without parole. Your fishing days are over, Dale."

"I didn't kill anyone. There was no one there."

"Price was there."

"No, he wasn't. If I shot him, where's the gun?"

"Probably in the river. Sheriff Hill's divers are looking for it right now. But even if they don't find it, I think the jury will understand."

"If I took his car, who drove the van?"

"You tell me." Adcock stood up.

"But I didn't do it!" Foster shouted.

"Lock him up."

Adcock walked back to his office. Sherry looked up at him as he went by. "It's a good thing criminals are so stupid," he said, "or we might never catch anyone."

Adcock put on his hat and went to talk to the county attorney. He didn't rush. At sixty years of age, he sometimes believed that the faster he moved the sooner his life would end.

Forty minutes later, he walked back into the office. "Sheriff," Sherry said, "Frank Martin just called from the bank. Two hundred thousand dollars is missing."

The vault rested only a few yards from the bank's two antique teller cages. Adcock stood just inside the door to the vault with bank president Frank Martin. Martin was about fifty. He was average in height, with an oval face and a pale complexion. "Did Jason Price have access to the vault?" Adcock asked.

"Yes, he did," Martin rubbed his forehead and ran his hand nervously through his thin hair. "In fact, he was the one who

closed and locked it last night at five."

"Who else had access?"

"Besides me, there's Martha Bell, Nancy Porter, Sandy Dunlap, and Mark Fisher. That's everyone."

Adcock wrote the names down. "Do you have any reason to suspect that one of them might have taken the money?"

"Not really. Although now that Jason has been murdered, it makes me wonder."

"If you hadn't made a special trip to the bank today, when would you have noticed the money was missing?"

"Not until Monday. No one usually comes in on Saturday or Sunday."

"So the person who took the money thought he or she would have two full days to get away with it."

"That's right."

"Have you noticed anything unusual about Price lately?"

Martin thought about this, then shook his head.

"Have you noticed anything unusual about any of the others?"

Martin looked out at the teller cages. "No, nothing," he said. He looked back at Adcock. "Sheriff, this is a disaster. You probably know the bank is in trouble. This could be the last straw."

"I know," Adcock said. "I'll do what I can. I'll need the address-

es and Social Security numbers for everyone who works here. We'll interview them as soon as possible. If we're lucky, we'll finish before the FBI gets in the way."

Adcock took Sunday off and went to work early on Monday. He expected another long day. He began by assigning Foley to question the four bank employees not yet interviewed. Next he instructed Hunter to go through Price's house one more time in search of clues. Then he told Sherry to call the Central States Credit Bureau and run a credit check on everyone who worked at the bank, including Martin. "And tell them we need it in a hurry," he said.

With his people now at work, Adcock began to receive guests. First he talked to an FBI agent. Then he spoke to a newspaper reporter, giving him the same answers as two days before. Next he talked to a bank examiner. Then he spoke to another reporter. Same answers again. Next he talked to agents from the Division of Criminal Investigation. Then he spoke to Jason Price's uncle. Next he allowed himself to be videotaped by a TV crew. Same answers. Finally, he went to the Royal Cafe for a solitary lunch of meat loaf, mashed potatoes, peas, apple pie, and three cups of black coffee.

After lunch Dr. Finney called. "John," he said, "I have a few things for you."

"Go ahead."

"First, Price died of a gunshot wound in the head. Looks like a .22 caliber slug to me, but we'll let the lab guys decide for sure."

"All right. Keep going," Adcock said.

"Now that we know the cause of death, the question is, why wasn't there any blood on the floor? There was blood on his clothes but none on the floor."

"Someone moved the body."

"That seems likely."

"Or someone cleaned up the mess."

"Which seems unlikely."

"Could you tell anything from the lividity of the body?"

"It looked normal for the way the body was lying, but if someone had moved it right away, the lividity would've changed to conform to the new position."

"What was the time of death?"

"Between seven and ten Friday night, based on the temperature of the body and the degree of rigidity by Saturday morning."

"One more question."

"What's that?"

"Where's the gun?"

"I don't know, John. They didn't teach us that in medical school. But there is one other thing."

"What's that?"

"I found a couple of small cinders in his shoe."

"Cinders?"

"That's what they look like. Send someone over and I'll give them to you, along with the bullet and his clothes."

Adcock hung up. Foley had returned, so the sheriff sent him to the morgue. Then he stared at the wall for a while. Foley came back with Price's clothes, the slug, and the cinders. They looked like coal cinders to Adcock. He picked up the phone and called Sheriff Hill, who agreed to send out some deputies to search every foot of track between the Amtrak station and the place where Price's car had been pulled from the river.

A little after two o'clock, the staff assembled in Adcock's office. Foley had conducted the interviews and had little to report, except that Nancy Porter thought that Price had been a little on edge lately, although she couldn't say why. Hunter had searched the house again and had discovered nothing new. And Sherry had obtained the results of the credit check Adcock wanted, thereby discovering one interesting fact: Mark Fisher was carrying more debt than a bank teller could repay in a long time—ninety thousand dollars' worth. "It's all in credit

cards and motor vehicles," Sherry said, "a car, a pickup, a motorcycle, and a snowmobile."

"And he likes to drive them fast," Hunter said.

"All right," Adcock said. "I want him followed twenty-four hours a day. I want to know everywhere he goes and everyone he sees. Sherry, call Chief Stocker and get us some help. Mark Fisher is Dale Foster's only hope of ever seeing Saint Joe again."

Foley left to keep an eye on Fisher, Hunter went on patrol, and Sherry went to call Chief Stocker. Adcock sat at his desk waiting for a revelation. He wished he knew more about Price's recent past. Price's uncle had been no help. A second search of the cottage had turned up nothing but a mess. Adcock stared out the window, then turned away. Suddenly he noticed the eye of Price's computer terminal staring at him from across the room. He got up and went to investigate.

Some people his age were afraid of computers, but not Adcock. Computers never got drunk, started fights, or stole coin collections. What was there to be afraid of? He turned on the machine, summoned a list of Price's files, and started fishing.

It was slow work. Price had obviously liked his computer. He

had created hundreds of documents and appeared never to have deleted anything. The names for his files were as confusing to Adcock as a Chinese phone book. He read letters, shopping lists, budgets, bad poetry, and an inventory of Price's coin collection. The sheriff printed out the list of coins and kept looking.

Half an hour later he found a strange document filed as "Untitled 46." The file consisted of one word typed over and over until it filled the screen. The word was "Sandy." Adcock grabbed his hat and headed for the bank.

The sheriff sat across the table from Sandy Dunlap in the bank's conference room. Sandy's most striking features were her big blue eyes and classic nose. She was as well dressed as always, in a dark blue suit and black pumps. "I don't know why he typed my name on his stupid computer," she said. "How do you know he was thinking of me? Lots of people have the name Sandy."

"But only one of them works at this bank," he said.

"Why would he type my name? It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't make sense unless he was in love with you. Then it makes all the sense in the world. That's exactly the kind of

thing people do when they fall in love."

"He wasn't in love with me. I'm married. I have two children. Why would he fall in love with me?" She raised her hands in a gesture of confusion.

"Why would he take two hundred thousand dollars from the bank?"

"How do you know he did it?"

"I don't know for sure, but it's a good possibility. Do you have any better ideas?"

"No."

"All right, Sandy, that's all the questions for now."

"Are you going to tell my husband about Jason typing my name on the computer?"

"Not today."

"Not today?"

"You can go now, Sandy."

She stood up and walked out.

Sheriff Hill called the next morning. His deputies had found a large patch of dried blood along a rarely used railroad siding just west of Garrison Falls. They also noticed that something had been dragged through the grass and weeds to a farm lane nearby. A DCI agent had already collected a sample of the dried blood and was taking it to the crime lab in Des Moines.

A few days later, Adcock received a call from a technician

at the lab. "It's human blood," she said, "and the same type as Price's. Of course, there are hundreds of millions of other people with that blood type."

"But only one of them got murdered here recently."

"That narrows it down."

"What about the slug I sent you?"

"It's a .22 long."

"A .22?"

"That's right, sheriff." There was a pause. "Anything else?"

"No, nothing else. Now we have to find the gun that caused the trouble."

For over a week, the sheriff, his deputies, and the Clearfield police took turns following Mark Fisher but didn't learn a thing. Adcock was sitting in an unmarked car down the street from Fisher's apartment one evening, trying to stay alert. He was beginning to think he'd made a mistake. It wouldn't be the first time, he told himself. Somehow this thought didn't console him.

At seven o'clock Fisher came out the door, got into his car, and drove away. Adcock followed, expecting another trip to the grocery store. Fisher seemed to have an insatiable need for Coca-Cola. He went through cases of it. Adcock had begun to suspect that it kept his hair red and his freckles in position.

But this time he drove past

the store and headed north on Highway 63. Adcock gave him a big lead. He didn't want to get spotted just when Fisher was about to show his hand. Fisher's red Pontiac, for which he still owed twenty thousand dollars, went straight to Garrison Falls, crossed the river, turned left on Second Street, drove several blocks, turned left again, and pulled into the parking lot at the Amtrak depot.

Adcock found a spot down the street and settled in to wait. Fisher didn't get out of his car. He just sat there. The sheriff assumed he was there to meet the westbound California Zephyr, but who would be getting off? Adcock had no idea.

The train was right on time. People got off. People got on. Fisher sat in his car and waited. The conductor looked up and down the platform, signaled the engineer with his flashlight, and stepped aboard. The train pulled slowly away, gathered speed, and disappeared into the night.

The passengers who had arrived climbed into cars and cabs, and in a few minutes the area was deserted. Except for Fisher, who was still waiting in his car. Ten minutes later a lone figure ran down the station platform and jumped into Fisher's car. She leaned over and kissed him on the lips. Ticket clerk Karen

Hauser was off duty for the night.

Fisher started the car and headed down Main Street. Adcock followed. He didn't have far to go. The Pontiac drove up Court Street hill to an old brick mansion that had been converted to apartments many years before. Fisher and the ticket clerk went inside, and Adcock waited. Two hours later, Fisher came out again, and the sheriff followed him back to Clearfield.

Early the next morning, Adcock called the Amtrak personnel office at Union Station in Chicago. He learned that a woman named Karen Hauser had worked for Amtrak in Garrison Falls for two years. He also learned that her middle name was Sandra and that her nickname was Sandy.

Late that morning Adcock arrived at Sandy Hauser's door along with Foley, one of Sheriff Hill's deputies, a Garrison Falls police officer, and a search warrant. A similar event was under way at Fisher's apartment in Clearfield, where Hunter and three Clearfield police officers were at work. Hunter and the other three officers found nothing incriminating at Fisher's apartment. At Sandy Hauser's place, Foley found a .22 caliber revolver and a suitcase containing two hundred thousand dol-

lars in cash. The initials on the suitcase were "J.P."

After the bank closed that afternoon Adcock assembled the staff, minus Fisher, in the conference room. "I think Price took the money," he said, "although Fisher might have. I need you to help me decide which one it was."

"Fisher couldn't have done it," Sandy Dunlap said. "He left early that day."

"That's right," Martin said. "He did."

"And he did it so that no one would suspect him of taking the money," Adcock said.

"And no one did," Martin said.

"So Price took the money, tried to make it appear he'd been robbed, and drove his car into the Des Moines River to complete the charade. He and Sandy Hauser had planned all this. He thought they'd run away together. He would take the train, and she would join him later. Instead, she told Fisher where to wait for Price along the tracks to relieve him of both the money and his life. Fisher then hauled the body back to Price's house to throw suspicion onto an unknown burglar. But before that, a real burglar, Foster, happened by and played his role perfectly. It all might have worked if Price hadn't gotten a couple of cinders in his shoe as he walked along an old siding."

"Cinders?" Sandy said.

"You're too young to remember it," Adcock said, "but when railroads used steam locomotives, they dumped the cinders and ashes from the coal along the tracks. They don't use coal now, but you can still find cinders here and there along the tracks, especially along sidings and in old freight yards. Price got a couple in his shoe, which showed us where he'd really been killed."

"So Mark Fisher and Sandy Hauser set Price up?" Martin said.

"That's how it looks to me."

"Just for the money?"

"Apparently so."

"There's something else," Sandy said.

"What?" Adcock said.

"When we were all in high school, Jason Price stole Mark Fisher's girlfriend. I thought they'd both forgotten it, but I guess I was wrong."

"Who was this girlfriend?" Adcock asked. "I'll need to talk to her."

"Start talking," Sandy said. "It was me."

*

Love, money, revenge. Adcock gave the county attorney three motives, when one would have been enough. It was late when he left the office, just as it always was, but he didn't mind. The people who elected him and paid his salary worked late, too. They were in the fields right now, bringing in a record harvest. Some of them would work all night.

He climbed into his patrol car and drove north from the town square, past the grain elevator on the edge of town, where two hundred thousand bushels of corn stood in a huge pile for want of enough trucks, railroad cars, and barges to haul it away.

Beyond the grain elevator, Adcock turned left and drove past the veterinarian's office, the graveyard, and the hospital. The town was quiet. The whole county was quiet. Only the distant hum of combines broke the evening stillness. Adcock drove home, took a beer out of the refrigerator, and opened the bottle. Two more just like it waited in the cold.

FICTION

Their Silly Little Hands

Theodore H.
Hoffman

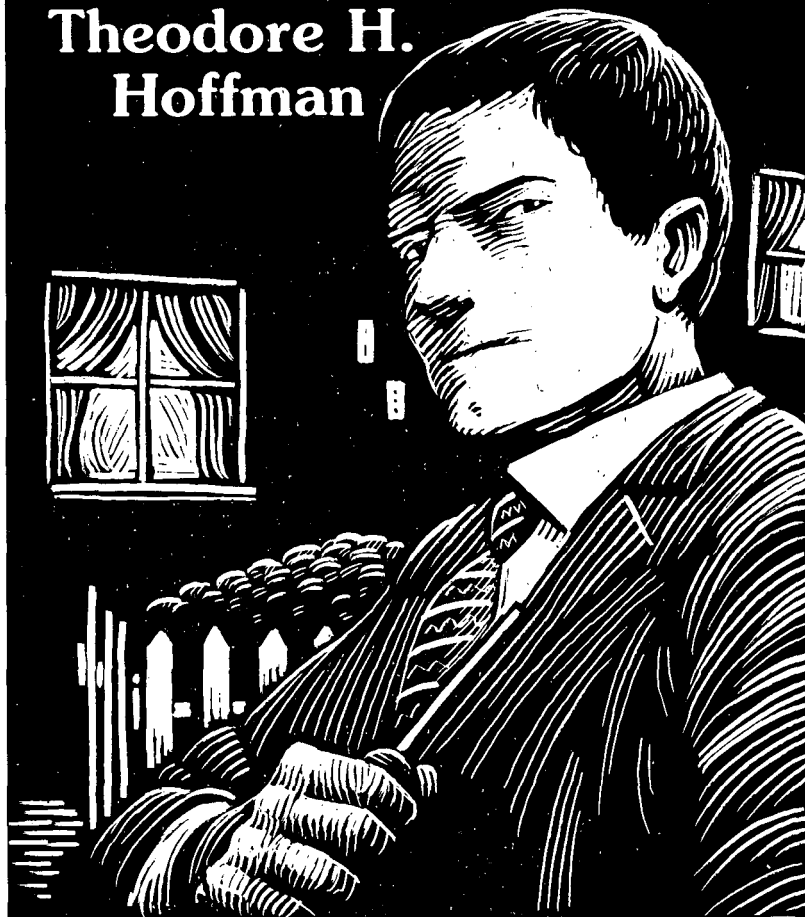


Illustration by Tim Foley

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 6/96

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**C**oming out of the bar smooth and straight like a razor into the night. The clap of his heels, imported leather tailored over lean and muscled feet, *k-DAP k-DAP k-DAP* against the sidewalk. The crisp sound echoes in the muzzle darkness of the doorways and alleys and side streets. It's a cool night, a clear night, grand for walking in a neighborhood like this, where muggers no longer lie in wait for the nine-to-fivers. *K-DAP k-DAP k-DAP*...

His name is Charlie Winters, Winter Charlie, the Ice Man cometh. He knows how to walk. How to pop the heel down, roll just a little on the balls of his feet. How to swing his arms lightly, chin up, eyes piercing and restless, nothing feminine in the churning muscles of his iron-pumped butt. How to maintain absolute balance even whisking around a blind corner, ready at every minute to spring or crouch or wheel around with a savage kick.

Charlie is wearing a Granetti suit, cobalt gray like his eyes, but without the puff of red at the outside corner of his left eye, a memento of some past confrontation. The suit looks like black neon beneath the weary glare of the street lights. It seems to absorb the lights from the few cars that rattle over the streets. There's a tiny, clotted-over nick on his jawline, to the left of his deeply dimpled chin, where he'd dug too hard that morning while shaving away his heavy overnight stubble.

There are no lumps in Charlie's pockets or beneath his lapels. Yet the weapons are there. A man learns how to camouflage them, even if he has no fear of the cops stopping him, no matter how late he makes his way down this sidewalk in this sleepy neighborhood. The guns, and the knives, and the roll of piano wire, you'd never know they were there. Unless you knew Winter Charlie.

*K-DAP k-DAP k-DAP*...

"Now, quiet, quiet, Ethel," her husband urges, carefully replacing the curtain where he'd been peeking through. "He's coming, don't let him see you." Richard pauses. "Get ready."

And who doesn't know him, here in this corner of what could be any good-sized city with an overworked police force numbly repeating how safe they're trying to make the streets. Who doesn't know Charlie Winters, a native son, youngest of eight, no father and a mother who'd spent half the milk money on dope. Charlie, Mr. Winters, who never got past seventh grade—about the only thing he never got past—but who's now welcome in any bar or brothel in town.



*K-DAP k-DAP k-DAP*, free and easy, pressed by cool darkness. Charlie doesn't hear the sirens in the distance, doesn't allow the wail to penetrate, the way a child in a wartorn country no longer hears the distant thud of artillery. He runs a manicured hand over hair that's like a glowing black helmet, it's so thick with mousses and oils.

He knows the wiseguys don't like his periodic, impulsive walks home from the bar (where he never drinks too much; a little sharpens the reflexes, a lot kills them, and you, if you're not careful). But he tells Mr. Russo this is part of his ownership of the neighborhood. Part of his deed to his property, the warden policing his own grounds, the master walking through the pound. Winter Charlie, making his presence felt. And feared. Mr. Russo shakes his head on those rare occasions when he acknowledges Charlie, but there's a hint of a smile on his craggy face. This is the kind of youthful brava-do that gave Charlie the guts to save Mr. Russo's life seven years before. That's not a thing a man like Mr. Russo forgets, and if Charlie wants to be a walking target, what's a wiseguy gonna do?

*K-DAP k-DAP k-DAP*. Past the businesses and into the residential district now, Winter Charlie and his stride. He glances into the windows of the houses and apartments with his legendary peripheral vision. It's been said that Charlie puts eyedrops into his ears to be able to see like that, that he has twenty-twenty eardrums, that he can spot a mosquito about to land on the back of his head, so acute is his range of vision.

That range has saved his life more than once. Two years ago the Drummond boy tried to waylay Charlie during one of these dark-night walks. The late Drummond boy, two quick bullets in the chest, a clear case of self-defense. Charlie saw the bullets at the hearing, both of them flat as the end of Charlie's nose, the tip of which was cut off in a schoolyard knife fight half a lifetime ago. It's a crime what the human body can do to a perfectly good bullet fired at it.

They're watching TV in the Drummond home. The eerie blue phosphorescence shifts and blinks through the curtained window. Charlie knows they're watching him. They'd like to see him dead, but they'd never be that brave or reckless. A visit from Charlie's friends would be just too big a price to pay.

Charlie tries not to think of these people as suckers. They're just pale little bean-counters, junk laborers, longtimers at the appliance factories around here, building silly little things with their silly little hands. The late Ricky Drummond worked in the radio factory

just like his soft old man still does, ten, twelve hours a day. What's it get you? Charlie's fond of asking. You work twelve hours a day in some sweatshop, putting together some gadget, some stupid little souvenir item, and one day you look up—

Richard hisses through gritted teeth, "Now, Ethel . . ."

—and there's a rustle and *pop* in the bushes right next to him and Winter Charlie is into a deadly tuck-and-roll, the Brevetto 7.65mm pistol and the baby ice pick materializing like magic in his hands. He's like a gymnast, a twist of his body to gain distance from the source of the noises and to put a potbellied oak tree between him and them. The Brevetto is leveled, the ice pick ready. There in that cool windless dark, Winter Charlie is ready to strike, calm as a surgeon, all prepped for death.

Nothing. Nothing. He uncoils to his feet, hugging the tree, swinging the ice pick back into its invisible holder. Nothing.

His narrowed eyes will the bushes to part and reveal their secrets, but it must have been an animal, maybe a bird or a lizard, and after another long moment's inspection, the smile is back. Because all the training paid off again, and Winter Charlie wishes it *had* been some stupe hoping to make a rep for himself. The pistol, gone now, the lean hands flexing, and *k-k-DAP k-DAP k-DAP* he's back onto the sidewalk, straightening his suit, dusting the dirt and leaves off it.

He flashes a glance at the Drummond home, where there's the slightest shiver of a curtain. Charlie hesitates, dismisses the thought, kills it. Letting the grin slide back onto his face, he strides on past the homes of the other suckers.

It's been a long day for Charlie Winters, what with making house-calls to remind these suckers to pay up for protection. The people in this neighborhood, they have too much pride. Pride you need, no question about that, pride and respect. But you've also got to know who The Man is, and these people come from strong immigrant stock and look at Charlie with steel in their eyes.

"Look at him, look at how he smiles." Lars and Etta watch Charlie from the barred second story bedroom window. "You just keep smiling, Winters. Come on, boy. Come on."

Charlie's got his rhythm back now, strutting on toward home

where he'll lock the doors and see about maybe calling up a girl to keep him company tonight. Lots of girls hope Charlie calls, and he's smiling when there are two metallic *clicks* from across the street and he's diving for cover behind some trashcans, knocking one of them over, and again the Brevetto is out. Charlie knows the sound of a pistol being cocked, it came from right across the street, right over there in the Bennermans' yard . . .

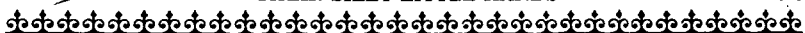
Charlie's close enough to the trashcans he can smell some kind of bean dish somebody threw out a couple of days ago. He doesn't let the smell penetrate. Any distraction and you could be as dead as metal, cold and careless as the Drummond kid. Smell could dull your other senses as much as sight or sound could, and there's nothing dull about Winter Charlie.

He peeks out from behind the garbage cans, looking for the flicker of movement that will give his assailant away. The Bennerman yard, open and cosy unlike the one Charlie grew up in, seems still. Most of the windows are dark; two upstairs glow with possibility. Charlie thinks about squeezing off a round through one of those windows, just to release the tension that has him pressed to the ground like the heel of one of his expensive Italian shoes. Just to send a message to that Etta Bennerman, who always looks at Charlie with such bald contempt when he visits the appliance factory where she works, using her spider fingers to put ridiculous tiny components together.

Distantly, he can hear the garbled mechanical voices of TV's that seem to be on in every house along the way. Stupes. Little gotta-pennies with their little hands, hands always building things and running over each other like dirty thoughts. These people.

But he can't spend the evening here, and it could have been anything, a cat or a rat, it's not the first time he's hit the ground because a woodpecker wanted to carve its initials in a telephone pole. Charlie rises warily to his feet. He looks down at the suit. Even in the relative darkness he can see the grass stains on his knees, his elbows. He curses, frees his hand of the gun. Now he just wants to get home. He pivots in a threatening circle, branding each doorway with his glare. *I'm Winter Charlie you damned little woodpeckers, and I could kill every last meaningless one of you if I felt like it!* Straightens his lapels, tugs at his sleeves, smooths the hair, lets his breath out. And he's on his way, a little less metronomic now: *k-DAP k-k-DAP DAP k-DAP k-k-DAP* . . .

Past the Sutters' house, the Dorfmans', working out the stiffness



in his left knee. Another car goes by, not seeming to notice him, but as always Charlie is tensed to dive and shoot out both eyes of the driver. But the car passes, just as he is passing the houses, finding his rhythm again, the jangled nerves quieting.

Anna wants to do it. Gustav tells her no, if there's trouble, he wants to be the one Winter Charlie blames. But she's insistent, and Charlie is coming, and he relents. "But not yet," he says to her, softly, firmly. "Wait until he gets right in front of us."

Ahead, the houses that will flank Charlie, the Jorgensens and the Krauses. Two families who have never given him trouble. They know who's in charge. Charlie exhales with anticipation. Just a few blocks to his own house now. Where he'll soon be in charge of some moist young thing eager for a glittering trinket he'll send her way, if she pleases him.

Then Winter Charlie gasps a curse as there's a rasping a clank a click *all around him!* and he's halfway through his roll when he collides with the tricycle, tangles himself, has to complete the move. There's a needlepoint of pain in his right ankle, but he blocks it, strains his senses to locate the ambushers trying to surround him, where the hell are they, where are those damn noises *coming from!*

He's breathing hard and shallow. The Sauer P38 this time, from his ankle holster, joins the Brevetto. His right ankle is still twisted in the tricycle. Winter Charlie, sprawled behind a hedge in, where the hell, the Krauses' yard. Waiting for another sound, come on, come on, just give him something to shoot at!

But just dark, just cool, just a lovely night here in the neighborhood, somewhere a dog serenading the moon, everywhere the families getting into beds, sliding into the sleep to prepare them for another day at their damn factories.

Charlie is gritting his teeth so hard the caps may come off. Not just because of the ankle or the tension of the moment. He heard it as he went down: a tearing in the pants leg of his suit. His beautiful imported fits-like-skin suit. He grips the guns. What the hell are these sounds! Once, maybe twice, you can write them off as night noises. But these last . . . ! Like a safety being offed, like a switch-blade jutting open, like piano wire straining against a leather glove! *Where are they!*

Charlie scans the area, pistol barrels following his gaze. No matter which way they come from, he's ready for them. This will swell



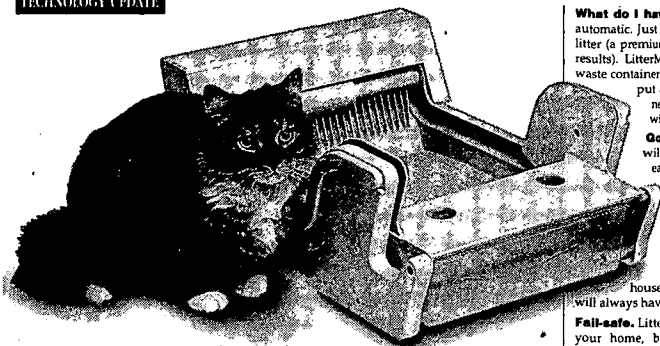
his reputation even more. *Hey, you hear about Winter Charlie? Took out three, pop pop pop, thought they had him surrounded and he scrambled their brains all three of 'em. Winter Charlie!*

But after five minutes, still nothing, and the right ankle is throbbing now, just a sprain, but the suit's a goner and so's his libido, just get him home and let him throw the damn locks!

Lights are going out now in the houses around him. *I'd like to put out all your lights*, thinks Winter Charlie. When he stands, he takes the handlebars of the tricycle like a matador grabbing a bull, and he twists and flings the tricycle against a maple tree. It clatters and whines and lies unconscious there, for its teary-eyed owner to find the next morning.

Something flits into his left eye, moist and spiky. It's a long curl of his hair, now in disarray, and the oil spots his eye and stings. Charlie jabs up to push the hair back into place and nearly brains himself with the Sauer, opening a small cut on his eyebrow ridge. The night air shudders with his curses, and he strides over and gives the tricycle a final kick. Then back to the sidewalk, a quick and uneven tempo now, but determined, oh how determined, because *nobody* better get in Winter Charlie's way! Just let somebody try to stop him! Just let one of these losers give him any grief right now and Charlie will make him eat his own eyes, just *get me home* and no more impossible noises!

Inside their houses, they hear the scuffle of his feet, the clatter of the tricycle, the rawness of his cursing. The footsteps fade. Inside, there are smiles and laughter, sometimes rare commodities in this neighborhood. They look in on their children before retiring for the night. They have to get up early. They are working people. These fingers have to assemble the most delicate mechanical and computerized components. The same way they can build tiny devices that so invisibly attach to telephone poles and tree branches and bushes. Devices activated with the touch of a remote control button, just at the precise moment, by the same hands that now clasp in prayers of gratitude and forgiveness, or fluff up pillows and caress familiar skin, and relax for a night of sound and peaceful sleep.



## Never scoop cat litter again... Computer technology creates the only self-cleaning litter box!

*You and your cat will love the way LitterMaid eliminates the hassle, mess and odor of the ordinary litter box.*

by Shirley Liberles

### Computer technology revolutionizes the litter box...

LitterMaid, a patented product from Waters Research Company, is a completely self-cleaning litter box operated by a microprocessor, but your cat uses it just like a normal litter box. Approximately 10 minutes after LitterMaid's "electric eye" senses that your cat has exited the litter box, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. ★ The comb sifts through

the litter, scooping up any waste.

★ ★ The waste is deposited into a sealed, air-tight waste container and the comb returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. The system resets, ready to repeat its cycle the next time your cat uses the litter box. ★ ★ ★ When the waste container is full, you can either throw it away and put a new one in its place or empty it and reuse it for up to one year!



House cats. Large or small, affectionate or independent, young or old, long-haired or short, they all create the same dilemma for their owners—the litter box.

There are few things I can think of that are as foul as cleaning the litter box at my house. Even when I clean it daily, it's difficult to keep odor away.

And this problem is multiplied because I have two cats! But because I love them, and that's virtually all the maintenance they require, I do it...because there's no other option.

Well, today there's a solution that cat owners across the country will be thrilled about. LitterMaid, manufactured by Waters Research, is destined to make ordinary litter boxes obsolete!

**Automatic cleaning.** LitterMaid is a computerized, completely self-cleaning litter box. Its operation is controlled by a microprocessor. An electric eye senses when the cat has exited the litter box, and minutes later, it signals the start-up of the automatic sifting comb. The comb sifts through the litter, scoops up any waste, and deposits it into a sealed, air-tight disposable waste container. The comb then returns to its original position, smoothing the litter. LitterMaid is now ready to begin another cycle as soon as necessary.

**Revolutionary.** LitterMaid may permanently change the face of the cat-product industry. Cat owners will never again have to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning their cat's litter box. Plus, there will be no more embarrassing litter-box odor in your home, because the disposable waste container is sealed and totally air-tight!

**What do I have to do?** LitterMaid is fully automatic. Just fill the pan with clumping cat litter (a premium brand will provide the best results). LitterMaid does the rest! When the waste container is full, just throw it away and put a new one in its place. You'll never have unsanitary contact with cat waste again!

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**Fail-safe.** LitterMaid plugs into any outlet in your home, but it can also operate on eight "D" batteries. So even in the event of a power failure, LitterMaid will continue cleaning. It is equipped with an alarm that alerts you when the batteries are running low.

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LitterMaid is only a couple inches longer and taller than conventional cat litter boxes. It should fit easily where your litter box is now—and you should put it there at first, until your cat gets used to it. But later, because LitterMaid is odorless and sanitary, you have the opportunity to place it virtually anywhere in your home—without any ordinary litter-box worries!

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### LitterMaid eliminates...

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- Having to endure the unsanitary and odor-filled chore of cleaning your cat's litter box
- Limiting the areas within your home in which you can place the litter box
- Worrying about how to clean the litter box if you go on vacation
- Having a cat who refuses to use the litter box because it's dirty
- Some risk of catching a disease from the cat's waste—this is especially important for pregnant women and people with immune deficiencies

FICTION

# 74 GAMES OF SOLITAIRE

Ron Goulart



Illustration by Jim Adams

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 6/96

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**S**he appeared right after the earthquake.

It wasn't much of a quake, not by Los Angeles standards. His ramshackle cottage in Santa Rita Beach shook and rattled for twenty seconds or so, dozens of books jumped off the crowded shelves in the small living room, and out in his untidy kitchen something hopped from the counter and smashed on the floor. Then it was over and that special after-a-quake silence set in.

Which was interrupted by her ringing his bell.

Despite the blossoming black eye and the torn denim blouse, Casey McLeod looked absolutely terrific standing there in the early twilight. Slim and blonde, with the darkening Pacific at her back.

He summoned all his strength and attempted to slam the weatherbeaten door in her face. But as was usually the case with her, he couldn't turn her away. "Begone," he said, "we don't want any."

"Let me in, please, Wes," she requested, timidly and politely. "I'm being stalked."

He narrowed his eyes, scanning the street and the stretch of gritty beach behind her. "Stalked by whom?"

"Could I maybe come in? I'll explain everything at great length, answering every one of your snide inquiries, but—"

"Wait now, Casey," said Wes Goodhill. "Are you not the same Casey McLeod who took off from here a year and a half ago? Leaving me not so much as a hastily scribbled note? That was after residing here and getting me involved in a scheme that sent your other boyfriend to the penitentiary. You are that person, right?"

"Roy Pomeroy certainly wasn't any boyfriend of mine." She made an exasperated noise, hopped over the threshold, and shut his door with a nudge of her elbow. "And as anybody who knows me as well as you do ought to have realized, I would never have given him a hand ghosting those cartoon panels if I'd known his poor old uncle was lying dead in the basement. But more to the point, can I hide out here for a week or so?"

"No, go away. You're a jinx."

She put a hand on his arm. "Wes, really. I know that in the past, on one or two occasions, I may have stretched the truth a—"

"Stretched it? You pulled it like taffy, you bent it and then trampled on it. You've conned me more times than Bugs Bunny duped poor hopeless Elmer Fudd. And now—"

"But I always come back to you," she pointed out as she eased farther into his living room. "Really, Wes, deep down

we love each other. We were, you know, meant for each other."

"There are probably at least a hundred guys in Greater Los Angeles who've been told the same thing by you. Exit now, Casey. Nice seeing you again. Scram."

She gingerly tapped her black eye with her forefinger. "Is this a fake?"

He reached out and touched the purpling skin. "It's not make-up."

"Of course it's not. It's real. I got that—and this tear in my blouse—when I eluded this psycho who's been stalking me, Wes."

"Is he outside now?"

"No, I managed to escape. But I can't go back to Pasadena."

"Pasadena?"

"That's where I've been living lately. I rent this dippy old house on a month-to-month basis."

"Who, exactly, is the psycho?"

"Oh, a fan of mine." She sighed, sat down on the low tan sofa. "See, I made this great commercial for Flush-a-Plenty. That's the toilet bowl cleaner that turns the water a gloomy greenish color and was invented by that old coot in Hawthorne who thinks fanny pinching ought to be an Olympic event. I'll tell you sometime how I used kung fu to get rid of him."

"For now, stick to explaining this crazed fan."

"He saw me on television flushing this toilet while wearing a really cute pink negligee, and he fell in love."

"That's natural enough."

"This isn't in any way funny, Wes. He found out my phone number and address somehow," she continued. "First he took to calling me up at odd hours and demonstrating his respiratory problems. Then, and this was extremely scary, he started appearing in person."

"What's he look like?"

"Creepy."

"Can you be a mite more specific, Casey?"

"Skinny, tall, unkempt. Red-headed. Twenty-five or so."

"And now he's attacked you?"

She nodded, putting her hands in her lap and clenching her fists. "Right after I got home from auditioning for a part in *Lower Back Pain*—that's the new sitcom about twin chiropractors."

"I know. Mike Filchuck, my old buddy, wrote a script for that one."

"Oh yeah, Mike. He's the one who used to lust for me behind your back when we first lived together."

"He's got a lot of words to describe his feelings about you, but lust isn't one of them."

"He's one of those cunning

guys who hides his passion behind a stockade of indifference."

"Facade," he corrected. "Get back to this assault."

"Well, this creep was inside my house when I got home. He made a lunge at me," she explained, swallowing hard. "I was able to knee him in a couple of strategic spots and get away, but not before he smacked me in the eye and ripped my next-to-best blouse."

"So you got away and came to me?"

"Exactly, Wes." She smiled tentatively up at him. "You're my oasis in times of need, you know."

"Yeah, but the last time I served as your oasis, it turned out you were conning me. You hadn't been in a canyon fire and—"

"I swear to you that I've changed," she insisted, reaching out and taking hold of his hand. "In the months that I've been away, I was in therapy."

"With whom?"

"Krishna Shankar. You've probably seen him on television. The Therapist Guru they call him."

"What TV show is he on?"

"It's one of those half-hour infomercials that runs at two in the morning. The point, Wes, is that he was very helpful, and I've ceased to be a fibber."

"A fibber? You're a pathologi-

cal liar, Casey. If you weren't so damned attractive in other ways, I would never even consider allowing you back into my life."

"Love is strange, isn't it? I mean, I always do seem to come back to you."

"Usually when you have some horrendous scheme in the works for conning someone out of money."

She held up both hands, palms toward him, and gave him an ingenuous look. "I swear to god, Wes, I am a new woman," she told him. "I really do need a place to lie low for a week or two. Then I'll get a new spot to live and hope this creep will forget about me."

"What about the police?"

Casey shook her head. "The police tend to share Mike's opinion of my credibility. The last stalker I reported, they told me I was trying to rig a cheap publicity stunt."

"There have been other guys stalking you?"

"About one every six months." She shrugged. "I seem to attract them."

Wes stood eyeing her for a moment. "Okay, you can use the guest room again," he said finally. "And you swear that you don't need me to draw something for you, or be part of some scam?"

"My own cartooning has vast-



ly improved," she assured him. "It's a real shame my old publisher is in the slammer because I've got a new issue of my *Bertha the Biker* comic book nearly finished. I'll show it to you later."

"You were fleeing a crazed attacker and you paused to gather up your portfolio?"

She stood up and moved toward the door. "Actually, I've been loading my meager belongings into my car for the past few days. Anticipating that I might have to make a quick escape." Opening the front door, she looked cautiously out into the thickening dusk. "Could you give me a hand moving in, Wes?"

"How much is there?" He followed her outside to where her red Mitsubishi was parked at the curb.

"Just those three suitcases and that old trunk."

The trunk was sitting in the back seat, a huge ancient thing. "What the hell is that?"

"Oh, nothing important. I picked it up at a warehouse auction a couple of months ago," Casey said. "I'd like to put it in my room with me, though."

"What do you have in it?" he inquired, opening the car door and taking hold of one of the humpback trunk's worn leather handles.

"Just odds and ends," she replied.

It was another earthquake, a lesser one five days later, that brought Wes an unexpected insight into what was actually behind Casey's once again taking up residence with him.

He'd come home a couple of hours earlier than usual from the Sparey Arts animation studios out in Studio City, arriving at his beachside cottage a few minutes shy of four. It was a clear warm afternoon, and as he let himself in, Wes called out, "Want to take a stroll along the beach, Casey?"

There was no reply.

Stuck to the front of his venerable refrigerator with a Minnie Mouse magnet was a note in Casey's borderline-illegible scrawl.

Hunching his shoulders, narrowing his eyes, he began deciphering it. "Talking . . . no, taking . . . taking a book . . . that's not right . . . taking a bike brown the bench . . . what's that mean? Wait . . . taking a hike down the beach. Back soon. Loud . . . no, Love, Casey."

He was reaching for the refrigerator door handle when the new quake struck.

The entire cottage started shaking. The butcher-block table commenced rattling, the stove groaned, his collection of



mismatched dishware rattled in the cupboard as the cupboard door popped open. The mayonnaise jar Casey'd filled with wildflowers fell over on the counter beside the sink. And from off in the guest room came a huge thumping thud.

As the shaking subsided, Wes hurried, cautiously, to the guest room. Casey was now sharing his room nights, but she kept most of her stuff in here.

The old humpback trunk had fallen off the bench it rested on. When it smacked the faded carpet, the lid had flopped open.

"Odd," muttered Wes, crouching beside the spilled contents.

The battered black trunk contained not clothes or heirlooms but two packages wrapped in brown paper and a single loose animation cel.

He knelt, picked up the sheet of celluloid, and held it up to the light coming in the window. "Holy Christ," he exclaimed, realizing what he had in his hand.

"This is, I must say, a very unusual place to find you praying." Casey, wearing shorts and an old sweatshirt with HARVARD lettered across the chest, was standing in the open doorway frowning down at him. "I came running back here, like a bus out of hell, when the quake struck to see if any damage had—"

"Bat out of hell."

"Bat, whatever. And instead

of damage, I find you—some hours ahead of your estimated time of arrival, by the way—ransacking my room."

"Your room in my house." He rattled the cel. "Do you know what this is?"

"Well, I ought to. Since possession of those darned Will Destroy animation cels nearly got me killed the other night."

Creaking slightly, he got to his feet. "You mean this crazed fan who's stalking you also happens to be a crazed fan of vintage animation art?"

"Well . . ." Casey came into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed, which had remained unmade since she'd switched to his room three nights ago. "Well," she said, crossing her long tan legs.

"You've been fibbing again, huh?"

She held up thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "A tad, yes."

"There's no stalker?"

"No."

"So who really slugged you?"

"I don't know who they are."

"They? More than one?"

"Pair of goons actually," she said. "I still have no idea how they got wind of my having the cels, but they broke into my place and ransacked it. That was while I was out auditioning for a BiffyMop television spot—do you think I could get typed as

a bathroom product commercial star?"

"Back to the break-in," urged Wes.

"Fortunately, I'd already stashed my trunk elsewhere," she continued, crossing and recrossing her legs. "But when I went home the other night, to gather up a few more belongings before fleeing to your protection—they were there, inside my place. Two immense louts, one of them Chinese, I think, and they tried to make me tell where the cels were. Fortunately I broke free and escaped."

"How'd they even know you had the trunk with the cels in it?"

"I don't know. Unless somebody from the auction told them."

He sat down on the bench that had held the old trunk, the cel still clutched in his right hand. "What auction?"

"If you'd quit interrupting the flow of my narrative, you'd understand," she said. "About three weeks ago I went to one of those warehouse auctions out in Glendale. You know, where they sell off unclaimed stuff that's been in storage too long. You have to bid on trunks and suitcases and boxes unopened. Just take potluck. I liked the looks of the trunk, and I got it for only sixty-five dollars. Wasn't until I got it home and opened the darn

thing that I realized what I really had, Wes."

He tapped the handpainted cel, which showed four children and a strange bird. "This is from Destry's 1942 full-length cartoon version of *The Phoenix and the Carpet*," he said slowly. "It's worth a hell of a lot of money, Casey. One of these sold at the last Marshall Gallery auction in Beverly Hills for forty-two thousand dollars."

"Yes, I know."

"Have you shown them to anyone? Offered them for sale?"

She shook her head. "No, I was planning to sit on them for awhile. Then I was going to come to you for some expert advice."

"Oh so?" He narrowed his left eye. "You've been homesteading here for nearly a week and haven't gotten around to mentioning them."

"You don't trust me," she said quietly.

"Not completely," he conceded, "not entirely, no."

"My original plan was to lead up to this gradually so you wouldn't get the goofy notion I'd come by these cels illegally or that I was trying in any way to con you or involve you in some shady scheme."

He asked, "How many cels are there altogether?"

"Twenty-seven," she answered. "You can look through

them all if you want. Since animation is your life's work and Will Destry was, as you've often told me, your boyhood idol."

"Twenty-seven cells at forty-two thousand dollars apiece comes to over a million bucks for the lot."

"One million one hundred thirty-four thousand dollars, actually."

"You really do own these?"

"Absolutely. I've got the bill of sale for the trunk and its contents in my stuff somewhere or other."

Stretching, he picked up the two packages off the floor. "What do you figure to do with them?"

Casey smiled. "Let me tell you what I've been thinking," she said.

**M**ike Filchcock got to Stookie's Restaurant in Studio City ahead of him and was seated at a rear booth with two open scripts and a scatter of pens spread out in front of him when Wes arrived. The redheaded writer was wearing a double-breasted suit of a vaguely mustard color and a black sweatshirt.

"How many guesses do I get?" inquired Wes as he carefully placed the package containing the Will Destry cel on the Formica tabletop and sat down.

"About what, dear chum?"

"Why you're dressed like that. Is it a costume party or a casting call for—"

"This is simply the height of fashion," explained his friend. "But you're evading the issue. Is it really true, God forbid, that that roadshow Vampirella is back in your woebegone life? Even locusts have the decency to recur only every seven years."

"Casey's in some sort of trouble and I—"

"Correction. She is trouble."

"When I was a kid, I remember seeing a book advertised in the back pages of a magazine," said Wes, finger absently tapping the wrapped animation cel. "It was entitled *74 Games of Solitaire*; being a guide to the game and its variations. Well, that's how I feel when Casey's not around. Like I'm playing endless games of solitaire just killing time till she shows up again."

"You need, my boy, a wider, saner social life."

"I take out other women, sleep with some of them, too. But none of them is Casey."

"Were I auditioning ladies for the role of Love of My Life," said Mike, "that would be the first question on the application. Are you now or have you ever been Casey McLeod? If the answer was in the negative, I'd waive

the rest and clasp her to my bosom."

"We have different views of Casey."

"How do you feel about the bubonic plague? Lots of fun, is it, from your point of view?"

"How's your new sitcom coming—*Barber's Itch*?"

"We've made some changes."

"Such as?"

"For a spell the title became *3 Chairs—No Waiting*."

"Catchy."

"At the moment it's *Alfie's Car Wash*."

"How does he wash cars in his barber shop?"

"We tested the barber shop concept, and it got a very negative response. People don't have pleasant thoughts about barber shops—or barbers."

"I've spent many a happy hour getting my hair cut."

"You also live with Typhoid Mary, proving you're far from being an average bloke," Filchuck reminded him, reaching across to tap the package. "Does this contain the sample Will Destry cel?"

"Yeah, I sort of borrowed one from Casey without letting her know," answered Wes in a lowered voice. "I just showed it to my friend Jon Kantry at the Cel Block in Beverly Hills."

"And?"

"It's absolutely authentic,"

said Wes. "Worth at least forty thousand dollars."

"Yikes."

"My reaction exactly."

"How many of them did you say Casey has?"

"She's got twenty-seven. All from the *Phoenix and the Carpet* feature. It took thousands of cels to make the film, but not that many have survived."

"Hence the forty thousand buck price tag on each one." Filchuck used a red pen to do some quick calculations on a napkin. "That comes interestingly close to being over a million dollars' worth of animation ephemera."

"Right."

"You don't seem as ebullient as you ought," noticed his friend. "If Casey continues to blight your life, at least now she'll be able to pay her own way."

Wes leaned back. "I've been trying hard to approach Casey differently than I have in the past."

"With a chair and a whip is how I'd approach her."

"What I mean is—I don't want to be conned by her, and at the same time I don't want to think everything she tells me is a downright lie," he explained. "Borrowing this cel without telling her and having Jon check it out—well, that makes me feel a little guilty."

"You're the kind who feels

guilty about setting out ant traps," said the writer. "You're being smart now, striving to authenticate all the wild claims she makes." He rested both elbows on the tabletop. "There are, in my view, several things to fret over here, old pal, even if these cels are real. Firstly, there is the possibility that Calamity Jane bopped some old beau over the bean to get possession of these twenty-seven extremely valuable hunks of celluloid."

"I've thought of that. Not that she assaulted anybody, but that she didn't come by them—well, honestly."

"Here's another plausible scenario. The cel you showed to Jon Kantry is indeed kosher and the real thing, but the rest of them are fakes and she's using you and your reputation as an honest animator to pull a scam."

"No, I've already studied them myself," he said. "They're authentic, I'm certain."

Filchock smacked the package with the flat of his hand. "Here's another variation. She gets you to make copies of the real cels and then peddles those to gullible aficionados."

"Casey wouldn't do anything like that."

"She's done similar things in the past."

"Okay, but I wouldn't go along with forging cels," said Wes. "But I have to admit, Mike, that

most of the possibilities you've come up with have already occurred to me."

"Well, then there's one positive thing about the lady—she stimulates your thought processes."

Wes said, "If she is into something crooked, I'm going to try to extricate her."

"Maybe," said Filchock, "it's not too late to send for that solitaire book."

**T**he evening before the kidnapping, Casey made a small confession.

She was sitting up in his bed wearing the frayed candy-striped shirt she favored instead of pajamas and reading a back issue of *The American Cinematographer*. Wes was in the adjacent bathroom using his electric toothbrush on his remaining twenty-nine teeth.

"Don't get mad," Casey called. "Hum?"

"Or angry. Don't, please, get red-eyed and belch smoke."

He went to the doorway, brush in hand, mouth foamy. "I haven't belched smoke since the late autumn of '94," he assured her. "What's wrong?"

Putting the magazine aside, she said, "I've been worrying about the trunk. Well, not so much the trunk as the Destry cels."

"Why don't you take them—I'll come along if you like—in to Jon Kantry and let him sell them for you?"

Her nose wrinkled. "I want to keep a low profile for a spell longer."

"Hold on a second." He returned the toothbrush to its holder, rinsed his mouth, wiped his face, and returned to the bedroom. "These cels do belong to you, don't they?"

"Absolutely. They're not hot."

"Then why are you—"

"Let me get on with explaining what I did," she interrupted. "And don't start screaming and stomping your feet."

"I rarely stomp my feet when I'm barefooted. You haven't gone and sold them, have you?"

"No, but I've taken the trunk away and hidden it elsewhere."

His eyebrows rose, and then he frowned at her. "Where?"

"Someplace other than here."

"Elsewhere does imply that, yes. Be more specific."

"They're with someone who's absolutely trustworthy even though a relative of hers is a felon at the moment."

"Roy Pomeroy? Some kin of his?"

"Well, yes."

"Who—brother, sister, mother, father, ex-wife?"

"Mom."

"Isn't she the one who used to

be a stripper? Torrid Tessie Tempest?"

"Lots of strippers and former strippers are as honest as the day is long."

"Is Torrid Tessie in that category?"

"Obviously. I simply didn't want you to think that I don't trust you and that that's why I conveyed the trunk and its contents over to Santa Monica this afternoon while you were off animating *Multitalented Morphin' Martian Monkeys*."

Absently Wes unbuttoned the top button of his pajama jacket. "If you just sold the damn things, you wouldn't have to worry about them," he pointed out. "Are you afraid those thugs are going to trace you here to my place?"

She shook her head. "They don't know about you."

He eyed her for a few silent seconds. "How do you know what these anonymous art thieves know or don't know?"

Casey said, "I'm assuming they don't."

"Since they didn't follow you here and they know nothing about me," he said, "the animation cels were as safe here as they are in Santa Monica. Safer, probably."

"I know, but if somebody does ever break into the cottage—well, they won't hurt you if there's nothing here."

"They won't stomp on me or detach any of my limbs if they don't find the trunk on the premises? These must be very ethical robbers."

She folded her arms, saying, "I'm not going to argue."

"Okay." He headed for the door to the living room. Then stopped, turned to face her. "Are you sure there's nothing about these damned Will Destry cels that you haven't told me?"

"Not a thing," she said. "I swear on a sack of Bibles."

"That's stack," he corrected.

At twilight the next evening, he got two phone calls.

The first was from his friend Filchock.

Casey wasn't at home, and she'd left no note. Wes had been hoping the call would be from her. "Hi, Mike," he said with minimal enthusiasm.

"It warms the cockles of my heart, whatever they might be, to receive such a warm reception," said the writer. "Is the Spider Woman within earshot?"

"Casey's not home."

"I can't go into great detail, old chum," he said. "I'm due at a story conference on *Alfie in Rio* at any moment."

"He's relocated his car wash?"

"He's running a beauty salon in Brazil now. Much funnier concept. The purpose of this communication is to pass on

some information I happened to hear today."

"I don't want any snide gossip pertaining to Casey."

"The facts I picked up do relate to Casey but can't be classified as gossip, snide or otherwise."

"Mike, maybe you can—"

"Listen and take heed. A couple of lads are looking for her."

Wes sat up straight on his sofa. "Do you know who they are?"

"No names were attached to them, but it's my impression they have something to do with the Country & Western music industry."

"What did you hear exactly?"

"Where'd Casey say she'd been living prior to descending on you?"

"She was renting a house in Pasadena."

"Not true," said his friend. "My source says she shared a condo in scenic Long Beach with a guitar player. The guitar picker being one of the two lads who's now most anxious to locate the lady."

"Why?"

"It has to do with some valuable artifacts she apparently absconded with."

"You're telling me what? That she stole the Destry cels from these two clunks?"

Filchock said, "I am merely a conduit, a channeler of messages. My sole purpose is to



warn you that a couple of rampaging sodkickers are on the trail of your ladylove. They may want to do you harm as well and—oops. My meeting is about to commence. Be on guard.”

Hanging up, Wes stood and wandered around his shadowy living room. Outside a very light rain began to fall through the darkening dusk.

The phone rang again.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t be mad at me, Wes.”

“Where the hell are you, Casey?”

“I can’t tell you that.” Her voice sounded dim and forlorn. “Just, please, listen carefully. Some people traced me to your place because—ouch, okay. These people are holding me at—ouch, all right.”

“What are they doing to you?”

“Nothing serious as yet. The bottom line is we have to make a trade,” continued Casey. “I’m sorry, by the way, that they sort of trashed your guest room looking for the stuff.”

“I haven’t looked in there yet, but—”

“They dragged me off after that, brought me here for a—um—little chat,” she went on. “And I decided to comply with their wishes, Wes.”

“What did they—”

“We can talk about that later,” she cut in. “The trade involves giving them the trunk and its

contents in exchange for me. So what you have to do is go get the trunk and then stand by. I’ll call you sometime tomorrow and arrange the exchange point.”

“Why can’t you just take them to where the—”

“Well, it’s mostly because, lord knows why, they don’t completely have faith in me,” answered Casey. “They suspect I’d lead them astray, but they figure you, being in love with me, will do this right and not call the police or try anything sneaky.”

“Sure, okay.”

“They want me to get off the—”

The line went dead.

Wes hung up slowly, then sat there with his hand on the receiver for nearly five minutes.

After that he stood up and started to think.

**T**he stretch of dark, slanting woodlands smelled strongly of burned brush. The small stucco house sat alone in a wide weedy field, light showing at most of the shaded windows.

“You absolutely sure you want to continue with this foolhardy scheme?” inquired Filchcock, who was crouched beside a tree trunk and watching the house. “Myself, I’m having sec-

ond thoughts about letting you recruit me for this mission."

"I'm nearly certain this is where they've got Casey." He nodded at the house.

"I've had a lot more experience with detective work than you have, old chum," said his friend. "I was, as you recall, head writer on *Malibu Cops* for almost an entire season, and I'm not sure your deductions are—"

"Eleven weeks was how long the show ran," said Wes. "This is where Bo Hatcher lives, and he's almost certainly the Country & Western guitar player Casey was involved with. He's also the only lad who went around to all the animation galleries in the area asking about the *Phoenix* and the *Carpet* cels. It's unlikely that a whole flock of down-home guitarists are—"

"It was careless of Jon Kantry to give the lout your name."

"I pointed that out to Jon when I talked to him earlier. But since I'd brought one in and Bo was interested in anyone who had done that—and since he slipped Jon a hundred dollars—Jon supplied my address."

"Let's assume that Bo is the goon in question," said Filchuck, shifting his grip on the black attaché case he was carrying. "So he goes to your domicile, finds Casey there, grabs her, and takes her to his own shack. Wouldn't it be simpler for you to

alert the cops or gather up the trunk full of Destriana and trade it for the lady? Not that she's worth anything like a million dollars in today's market."

"No police until I'm sure Casey didn't swipe the stuff from Bo Hatcher," said Wes. "That might result in her getting tossed in jail."

"Not an inappropriate location."

"On the other hand, if they really belong to Casey, then I'm damned if I'm going to turn them over to this lout."

Sighing resignedly, Filchuck said, "Okay then, let's get going." From the attaché case he took a pair of Luger pistols. "Take one."

"These look like antiques. They may not convince these—"

"Props are tough to smuggle out of the studio. I had to settle for what I could glom with ease." He placed one of the guns in Wes's hand. "These are being used in the *Hitler's Dentist* movie of the week they're shooting right now."

Wes tucked the gun into the waistband of his trousers and concealed it with his jacket. "Okay, distract them for at least five minutes."

"How many fellow goons is Bo likely to have with him?"

"At least one other, probably. Jon said he had somebody with

him when he hit the Cel Block this morning."

"Big chap, you mentioned?"

"Large, yeah."

"Keep in mind that these guns shoot blanks. They're better for threatening than for blowing people away." Filchuck stepped free of the surrounding woods and went walking down through the weedy yard toward the front door of the house.

Crouched low, the barrel of the prop Luger jabbing him frequently in the lower abdomen, Wes sprinted through the night darkness. As his friend knocked on the front door, he sneaked around to the rear of the stucco house.

"What the hell you want?" a gruff voice demanded out front.

"I'm looking for Bo Hatcher, the noted Western guitarist," explained Filchuck in a voice that sounded a bit high and thin.

"What for?"

"I'm Anson Haiblum, an A&R man with Ventura Records. Here's my card."

Wes, ducked down, prowled along the back side of the house. The shades weren't down completely on two of the three lighted windows. He eased up to the first window and risked a look inside.

"A record guy?"

"Exactly. We've heard some terrific things about your little

Western Swing band, Mr. Hatcher, and—"

"I ain't Bo. I'm Tony McYancy. You know, the fiddler?"

Wes found himself looking into the kitchen. There was an impressive quantity of unwashed dishes piled in and around the sink. But no people, no sign of Casey.

"The violin virtuoso, of course. We'd like to sign you all to a long-term contract. Might I come in and discuss our offer?"

"Bo's kind of busy just now."

Wes moved quietly to the next window. He peered in, then exhaled sharply.

It was a bedroom, walls painted black. Casey was there, tied to a rickety wooden chair with a greasy coil of tow rope. Sitting on the unmade brass bed and drinking a beer was a large thick-set man of about thirty. He was scowling at Casey, gesturing with the hand that held the coppery beer can.

Wes moved back, scanning the ground around the window. He selected a large rock, picked it up, and, after taking a deep breath, hurled it through the window.

He went up to the opening in the shattered pane, reached in gingerly to pull up the shade, and then thrust in the Luger. "Nobody move," he shouted.

"What the hell?" Bo started to get up.

"Sit," advised Wes. "Don't make me use this gun."

"I was sort of hoping," said Casey, smiling, "that you'd do something dashing like this, Wes."

**I**t took several months for everything to get resolved. Bo Hatcher and Tony McYancy ended up incarcerated, and Casey was eventually established as the rightful owner of the twenty-seven animation cels. She had indeed been living with the Country & Western musician, and it was Bo who'd actually bought the humpback trunk at the unclaimed property auction. He had no notion of the value of the Destry material and, knowing Casey's interest in cartooning, had given them and the trunk to her. Later, after she'd moved out, he got to wondering why she'd insisted on his signing a bill of sale conferring all rights to the trunk and its contents to her. With the help of McYancy, Bo had found out that the cels were from the 1942 Destry feature cartoon and worth considerable money. Angry that he'd been hoodwinked, Bo had started looking for her. Having no current address, he and McYancy canvassed all the animation art dealers inquiring about re-

cent sightings of any *Phoenix and the Carpet* artwork. The black eye and torn shirt that Casey had displayed when she arrived at Wes's had been given her by another suitor altogether, but she'd decided to use them to make her narrative more convincing. She wanted to stay with Wes in case Bo got, as it turned out he did, wise to the true value of the cels and turned, as he had frequently done, violent.

The Marschall Galleries on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills put sixteen of the Destry cels into their September animation auction. Casey stored the rest in a safety deposit box. The batch sold for a bit over seven hundred thousand dollars. Her share, after all the commissions and fees were deducted, was going to be five hundred sixty thousand.

She lived with Wes during those months, and it was a fairly happy stretch of time for him. While waiting for the check to arrive, she frequently discussed her plans for using the money with him. One of the things she wanted to do was have him work on an animated short based on her *Bertha the Biker* comic book. She also figured they might be able to put a down payment on a large and less ramshackle house.

It was raining on the October evening when Wes found the note. He'd come home an hour

late from the animation studio but hadn't bothered to phone Casey. She'd long since told him that she never started worrying until he was over three hours late.

There was an odd new feeling to the cottage. An emptiness was already starting to set in.

The note was stuck to the refrigerator door with the Minnie Mouse magnet. She'd printed rather than using her handwriting, and it was much easier to read.

*Dearest Wes: The check finally arrived today. I'm going to be 28 in a few weeks, and I long ago promised myself that I was going to see*

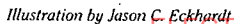
*Europe before I was 28. So I've banked most of my loot but taken a wad of it and am embarking on a long-term tour of Europe. I'll be back in a few months probably, and when I do return, we'll do all the things we talked about. I promise. Love, Casey.*

Shaking his head, he removed the letter from under the magnet, folded it, and put it in his shirt pocket. Wes walked over to the window above the sink and watched the dark Pacific for a few moments.

"She was twenty-eight two years ago," he said to himself, and turned away.

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**AND I'LL TELL  
YOU NO LIES**  
Jeffrey Scott



**M**atch got out of the car, taking care not to slam the door. Instead he eased the door into place and had to bump it with his hip before the lock snapped home. He was driving a mass-produced product, he reflected, whereas relatively few men, an identifiable team, had built Cornwallis's car by hand, so far as anything was done that way any more. So Cornwallis's doors seated themselves with a subdued yet solid *clunk*, every time.

There was no need for caution in Buccleugh-square, City of London. The only killings here were financial, unless one counted the calculated murders of smaller companies by bigger ones.

But for years Match had been cautious about car doors. He remembered somebody who had slammed from habit, earning frowns and half-seriously wagged fingers, a muffled, "Bloody hell, Tony," in the dimness. Must have been a winter night, for memory supplied smells of frost and chimney smoke. Yeah, Tony Parego, that was his name. . . . The reproofs had carried no urgency, more a sly way for professionals to take the guy down a peg while showing superior street wisdom.

Until, surprisingly long for a little revolver, a tongue of fire stabbed from a second floor win-

dow, and Tony Parego was dead. Flat on his back, looking supremely relaxed if one didn't know he was lying on flagstones, not foam rubber.

Staring at Buccleugh-square without seeing it, Match thought he had picked a funny old way to earn a living. Interesting was another label: it must be very interesting, people often said that. In his disillusioning, experience, people would say anything.

Middle-sized, middle-aged, wearing blazer and slacks, Match padded across the square in the type of soft-soled desert boots hardly anyone wore any more. Well turned out as far as creases and fairly newness went, fit in anywhere—office, factory, racecourse—without notice, yet never quite in key. He stopped and glanced back and then stepped around a lime tree in its iron-strapped corset before jogging along an alley. Soon it split into two other alleys, sharp left and right. He turned around, feet still pumping, saw nobody behind, and two minutes later emerged at a walking pace in a street of shops.

The building had been a law stationer's, but now its big double windows were empty, obscured by blinds neither grimy nor regularly dusted. A brass plate beside the door announced Balfe, Balfe & Balfe without ex-



plaining what they did. Match went in.

The outer room, cleared of shop fittings, wasted much space. The desk bearing a telephone and another telephone and a cheap fax console looked marooned and forlorn, as did the receptionist. Match stood for a moment, studying her and the room. "Please don't do it, the joke," she said. "You don't want Mr. Balfe or Mr. Balfe, you want Mr. Balfe."

He smiled, it might have been genuine, shedding a decade despite deepened crowsfeet. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"They do, motorbike couriers and that."

"Get many couriers in, do you?"

The girl took the casual question for polite noise. She raised her eyebrows, waiting.

"Naish, Mr. Naish. Tell him it's about Cornwallis." He had to repeat the long name. When she inquired his, Match repeated, "About Cornwallis, that'll do."

A sort of minstrel's gallery overhung the rear of what had been the shop. Seconds after the girl put the phone back and asked him to wait, a diamond of sunlight materialized on the floor beside Match. He didn't look up. After he'd counted to nine in his head, an upper level door closed again, obliterating the diamond. The receptionist

picked up a phone, listened, said that Mr. Naish would see him now, stairs over there. As he ascended, another phone rang, and he heard the girl answer with its number. After a pause she confirmed, "Saint Andrew's Appeal, Honeyford, that's right."

Eavesdropping, Match smiled a different smile. The borough of Honeyford was ten miles from here, but the number she'd given was for the Honeyford area, not here in the City. When he reached the gallery, Naish was looming there.

"Listeners," Naish wheezed, "hear no good of themselves. We haven't sat down yet and you're breaching hospitality." Since his normal style was that of a hectoring buffoon, it was impossible to tell whether he was serious.

"Nice to know you're still good friends with telephone engineers," Match countered, walking past the old man and into the office. It bore the imprint of the shop's original owner, with a handsome pine mantelpiece and carved cupboards. There was a cabbage-water reek of stale cigars. Match opened the sash window, wiped grimed hands on a linen handkerchief, and sat down in the chair behind the desk.

"Make yourself at home." Naish, after a baleful glance at the opened window, took the visitor's chair. "Flying visit I trust."

"Depends on you, Edgar. Simple question—was Cornwallis corrupt? Remember, you can't slander a dead man."

"In this country," Naish amended. He was a legal expert of sorts. A ghostly rustle accompanied his speech, as if the white-collared, blue-striped shirt hid several layers of brown paper crackling as his chest moved. Ed Naish would be dead within a year or so. Emphysema, lungs drowning in mucus, heart forced to work that much harder, while chronic obesity, liquor, and nicotine compounded the problem.

So much the better—aware of time running out, Naish would fear wasting it trapped in a hospital bed, and traction.

"Was he corru . . . Matchbox, Matchbox, you are a one. I mustn't laugh, it makes me breathless, but you tempt me sorely."

"Just answer the question."

Edgar Naish, knees spread to accommodate his belly, radiated knowing contempt. "Was Detective Chief Superintendent Cornwallis bent, the man asks. Impish humor is not your forte."

"The question, Edgar. Answer it."

"You worked for him when the world was young, you must have seen he was an earner, sold himself to the highest bidder." Naish did a doubletake and smirked pityingly. "Good God,

you never caught on. A virgin at your age! If ever a man needed a second pair of hands it was Corny. *That* is how much he was on the take. Bent? Another fraction of a degree and he would have met himself coming back."

"You always did exaggerate," Match alleged thoughtfully.

"Impossible in his case. It wasn't a heart attack, Corny died of the feeding frenzy, same thing sharks are subject to. He grabbed and he grabbed and one fine morning he woke up and contemplated the . . . the sheer *enormity* of his greed, and it blew all his fuses." Naish had to break off, patting his chest, eyes watery. "Sharks have been known to bite chunks off themselves when there's blood in the water—your erstwhile boss exploded his own ticker."

Match spoke as if nothing had been said after his previous remark. "You never did like Cornwallis."

"What's to like?" Naish demanded resentfully. "We'd broken bread together, he and I, but Corny still fitted me up for that piffling forgery, the dud bank draft. Prosecuting counsel looked hangdog throughout, judge sniffing over the depositions like a maiden aunt given a rotten egg. Anyone with half a brain could perceive a stitch-up—false evidence, altered state-

ments, *fictional* statements. Outrageous! But Corny had the reputation, d'ye see, the charisma."

"Everyone in jail is innocent."

"Don't be obtuse," Naish growled. "I was guilty—but *not guilty as charged*, get your wooden head around that. If Cornwallis had not been involved, the case would have been *stopped*."

Unshocked, Match argued, "Which isn't to say he took bribes. Out of your own mouth you'd done it. He made sure you went down. It happens, or so they tell me."

"Ask yourself why he went to all that trouble. It wasn't his last chance to slap me down, he knows, knew I'm always at it. The trial cost half a million pounds, and the outcome was that I met a few old chums in open prison, out before I knew it. Hardly cost-effective, old boy."

"Cases have to be brought, Edgar."

"Not that one," Naish insisted. "Corny was filling an order, earning his bread. I had a project ready, such a project." Setting bunched fingertips to liver lips, he made a kissing noise. "Somebody was determined to reap the harvest I sowed, and they paid Corny to bump me off the pot."

Grievance aired, Naish start-

ed calculating again. "You're a long way from home."

Taking him literally, just to be awkward, Match said, "No, I still live in London. Don't change the subject."

"My God, you are dense. I meant professionally, your league. It has to be twelve or fifteen years since you and Corny were joined at the hip. He blossomed into a folk hero, cashed in on it ever after. Accent on cash." The old man's mouth pursed, tasting the malice. "You never blossomed, just more of the same, a mere copper. Out in the suburbs at that. Rotary lunch once a month if you're lucky, stale bread roll with the canned tomato soup. Major media exposure is a spread in the weekly free-sheet, circulation ten thousand, through the letterboxes and straight into the dustbins ...

"This week's grand exclusive: Crime Prevention Special, Inspector Match's top tips to sweep crime from our streets—'Lock up those garden tools, and make sure your bicycle has a rear light.'"

The sarcasm was heavy enough to amuse even as it insulted. Naish had got away with a hell of a lot in his life through his ability to tickle violent men on both sides of the law.

The chair warped, feet skittering, as he heaved onto one but-

tock to fumble for his cigar case. "Even you must have made inspector by now, surely. The rest I would wager my own money on."

Nice recovery, Match thought, but five years ago you wouldn't have needed to make it, Ed. Having gained the confirmation he was seeking, Match was relieved that there was no need for threats. He had been prepared to point out the perils of Naish's homeward journey, stairs to be fallen down, buses only inches away from the curb, one shove would do it.

Ed Naish wouldn't have believed him, certain that Match was not that breed of copper. Match didn't want to find out whether he had changed. He might have, now that the Rubber Heels, policemen who hunted policemen, were on the horizon.

**H**er hair was a new color and styled differently. When she appeared near the entrance, beamed and wriggled at by the head waiter, Match felt a pang of sexual interest combined with envy for the lucky man she was meeting. Then he realized he was looking at Viv.

His cheeks were hot, and when he stood up, the napkin slid off his lap, only when he

grabbed it, flowers in the centerpiece slid towards him because what he had snatched was a hanging corner of tablecloth.

Naturally she drew the wrong conclusion from his dithering and made the face at him. She wasn't aware of her quick grimace: *Don't do this to me*. Encountering something so familiar and domestic in a virtual stranger—not just the hair, she was another person—disturbed him.

"Is this a sorry-Vivienne-the-check-will-be-late-again-this-month lunch?"

He shook his head, another waiter appeared, they ordered. "We aren't Viv any more, then?"

"Viv needs to be ten years younger, a bit less savvy. Vivs get their bottoms pinched. I'm a funds manager."

"And Viv's common," he asserted. "Working class."

"I'm using my full first name, what a snob. How's your Swedish whore? She ought to do something about your clothes."

"Danish, and there was nothing in that. I thought post-divorce was another country, anyway."

"Truce," she said, another flick of bygone partnership. Match recalled the woman across the table talking to him while letting naked breasts show in a gaping bathrobe as

she leaned past him for her toothbrush; nothing to hide. The memory might have been overheard and borrowed, it had lost any personal impact.

Match moved unwanted food about on the plate. "I'm in trouble. Cornwallis—"

"Jesus," Vivienne said under her breath before he could go on. "I watched it on TV, seven-second bite of the funeral, you were right at the back. I thought, that awful man can't harm him any more; at least Alan broke that spell and got away. I care, you know, still worry about you. Every time a policeman gets killed, I stop what I'm doing and wait for the name."

"I didn't break any spell, it never existed. Cornwallis went onwards and upwards, and I stayed behind. He wasn't a magician, Viv, Vivienne. Look, we all know you're a great judge of character, do me a favor and listen for once." Ed Naish's ploy of inviting hostility to divert attention. Match wanted to stop her thinking about policemen getting killed.

"He used you," she nagged, "and never gave you credit. Cornwallis, the Man Who Shot Liberty Valance—correction, it was Sable, he shot Sable. In his dreams."

"Sobell. It was dark, we were rolling down a hill at the time and both of us trying to get the

gun off a raving psycho. I don't lie awake nights over losing the credit for blowing somebody's head off." God, he sounded like he hated her; hated remembering Sobell Night, nearer the mark.

"Truce," Vivienne repeated wearily. "We do it, don't we. The old firm, reliable as ever."

Futile anger, potent dread, made him want to shout that he didn't care if they'd messed each other up. Match blotted sweat from his upper lip. "The Rubber Heels could be after me—the Gestapo, C15, internal investigations. Me! They spent two days at Cornwallis's house last week, and a guy's been to Spain, turning his villa over. Yesterday I had a meet fixed with Dickie Duster, golf. A regular thing. He never turned up, so I gave him a bell. Sandra came on saying he had twenty-four hour flu unless it's a virus, could be food poisoning. Couldn't even get their story straight. He'll be in touch when he gets over it, she reckoned. Him feeding her the script all the while, I could bloody hear him whispering . . ."

Match tailed away. "There's a thought, he wanted me to hear. Dickie looks after Dickie, but he has to be everybody's friend, run with the hare, hunt with the hounds. I get out of this lot, he'll say he was giving me the gypsy's warning."

"Rubber Heels after you? Paranoia." She lighted a cigarette, Match wondering who had given her that slender gold lighter and what she granted in return. Viv or Vivienne would not buy such a toy for herself.

"I mean, it isn't possible, is it?" Beneath expensive cosmetics she was haggard.

"Don't tell me what is possible in the Job." She kept on looking at him, and he admitted, "It's more than a hunch, I have been out of the loop, what little I am in, for the past forty-eight hours. Guys not returning calls, a meeting cancelled, I didn't catch on until the Dickie thing. Nothing's been said, no accusations. So far, but I've got a rotten feeling."

Match steeled himself. "You know the stuff about the house," he began.

Viv had asked him to buy her out when they parted; a flat could be bought if she moved fast. Five minutes from the office and a good investment besides, double its value in five years. "There was no point in telling you at the time, but I didn't get all that money from the bank."

Her hands stilled, the cigarette sent up a ribbon of blue smoke crumpling at shoulder level. She whispered, "No, no, no," shaking her head each time.

"'Fraid so. Cornwallis helped me out."

"You fool."

"Hindsight," Match sighed. He paused until a waiter went away. "I said the Rubber Heels are sniffing, so now you're ready to believe Cornwallis was bent. Before . . . come on, nobody said a word against him. Not that sort of word, leastways. Because he hid in plain sight, I see it now. Every time the press wrote about him, it was 'wealthy crimefighter' and Cornwallis of the Yard leaving his million pound mansion to zap the East End villains. He was *supposed* to have pots of money, nobody expected him to live down to his salary."

"We never did the sums and applied common sense—country house, flat in town, place in Spain, classic car for show and a new Jag every three years. Okay, he inherited a fortune while he was still on the beat, famous for it, but everything he did ate capital, daresay he was tapped out at thirty-five."

"That house wasn't worth more than seven fifty K, tops," Vivienne sniped. "Rotten position, needed modernizing."

Triggered by the irrelevance of that, affection swept over him. "Whatever, we all knew, thought we knew, he was well-off. So I asked for a loan . . ."

It had taken Match two days

to dial Cornwallis's home number without putting the phone down again. He'd wanted to do right by Viv, and the bank refused to lend him more than ten thousand pounds. What had stuck in his throat was how Cornwallis would take the request. He might assume it was implicit blackmail over the Sobell affair. They hadn't worked together since.

"Look, I'm desperate," Match told him, "but it is a loan, don't get any wrong ideas."

And Cornwallis had been good as gold. Lots of dockyard swearing: Don't be a something idiot, think I don't something-else know you by now? Match could stuff the interest up his jacksie for all Cornwallis cared, he wasn't a something-something user. And they needed nothing on paper, why give a lawyer work? If Cornwallis died before the money was repaid, tough. Money no good where he was going, har-har-har. Five and a half grand, something-else hellfire, the way Match had been going on, Cornwallis thought he was after *money*. No sweat, boy.

The check was hand-delivered the following day by one of the Special Crime Squad fellows, a detective-constable bearing a sealed envelope.

Three years down the road, Match told his ex-wife, "It will take time, but they'll pull bank

records and there I am getting serious money off my former guv'nor. The pig of it is, I've been paying him back, only twelve hundred or so to go. Cornwallis wanted cash. Seemed funny, but I was in no position to argue. I'd tip up every couple of months, pass him the cash on the sly. Point is, the Rubber Heels will see five and a half grand from him to me, and I can't prove it was a loan. Sounds a load of fanny to me and I know it's true. Who in their senses lends an old mate that much, unsecured loan, zero interest, no written agreement?"

"Seemed funny," Vivienne quoted flatly. "What's the matter with you? He was setting you up, never forgave you for walking out on him. You still don't get it, Cornwallis was evil, schemes within schemes, always plotting."

"There you go again, evil. He just kept a lot of balls in the air, best as he could." Match was objective. "I think after he lent me that money Cornwallis had a scare, maybe a complaint made, investigation in the air. He didn't want entries on his bank statements he'd have to explain. What's more, lending me money was against regulations. No, it wasn't evil, he was protecting himself. Never struck him he was setting me up—"

Match tingled all over and



swallowed hard. When he resurfaced from urgent thought, Vivienne was saying, "It's my fault, getting on your back about buying the flat." She had stubbed the cigarette out and was lighting another.

"Not what I'm saying. Not why I told you." He called for the bill. "I'll walk you back to work." But a hundred yards from the restaurant he led her to a vacant bench.

"Maybe you are being paranoid," she suggested hopefully. "Why would they investigate you after all this time? Cornwallis must have had other disciples since then, lay down their lives for the guy, he coughs and they get a cold. Sorry. But you must admit he owned certain people body and soul."

"He was a hell of bloke." Match shook his head irritably. "They'd investigate if anyone pointed them at me; signs are that somebody has. Cornwallis couldn't have been taking back-handers without at least one of his lads knowing. Knowledge is power, the guy would be having a dip in the gravy. Now he needs a scapegoat."

"Get out while you can, stage a nervous breakdown or something, resign. If they already think you're dodgy, the high-ups will be delighted to get rid of you, sweep it under the carpet. Met' Police motto: Least Said,

Soonest Mended." At least that had not changed, her acrid dislike of his masters.

A pigeon strutted up and, rodent-swift, pecked a crumb from beside her foot. Every detail of its plumage, rainbow sheen on drab feathers, filled Match's conscious mind before he started tracking again. "I just wanted you to know the real starting price. Things could get very iffy soon, my phone will have listeners, it wouldn't be clever to start telling you the score then. They will question you and anyone else I have ever been close to. Tell 'em, Rubber Heels and reporters and your people at work, we are divorced, nothing to do with each other. True enough, it has been mainly through lawyers lately."

He stood up. "I'm sorry, Vivienne. If I could spare you this, I would. Now you know the real story before you start hearing lies. Not that I've given up, mind—still got a sleeve with tricks up it." For an instant, intent on buoying her up, he nearly believed it.

She stared at him. "You won't send your papers in, resign." Statement, not question.

"No reason to, I'm not the one who took bribes. 'Bye for now." He was pleased about remembering to call her Vivienne.

\*

**E**very second bungalow had a weeping willow in the front garden, or a wishing well too small for a proper bucket to enter. On a pleasant evening every third garden along the modest cul-de-sac of a 1960's development was being worked on, generally by elderly couples or single women, deadheading roses, watering petunias. Heathrow was a few miles distant; they seemed oblivious to airport noise.

It wasn't the environment Match would have expected of Stan Geoghan, who put himself about a bit and fancied he had style. Still, the Job was like that, plenty of roaring boys on duty who turned into henpecked nonentities or collectors of porcelain at home. Match knew one senior rank who dressed and talked like a diplomat yet lived in a slum flatlet.

Shirtsleeved Stan Geoghan, who had answered the door holding a pizza slice well clear of Armani trousers, blinked at the caller. "Not convenient at the moment, Alan."

"It never is, Stanley." Match walked past him, stopping at the doorway to the lounge. Its spaciousness took him aback, the scale would suit a hotel lobby. Forty feet off, the room ended in a wall of glass bisecting an ornamental pool beneath, half in the house and half outside.

Openly taking inventory while Geoghan hovered, Match was impressed. "Gutted the place and added on at the back, eh? Made a little palace of it, and who'd guess from the outside." Innocently diverted, he strolled towards the window wall.

"Two wages coming in," Geoghan explained tersely. "Cheryl makes more than I do." Mrs. Geoghan worked part time on the checkout at a supermarket, and she'd not lived with him for eighteen months. Letting that pass, Match sank into a leather sofa, his sigh signaling a man glad to get off his feet and in no hurry to rise. "I'd offer you a drink, but I have to go out in a minute." The other man checked his watch. Gold, the flash git. And gold-plated taps in the ensuite bathroom, no doubt.

"Sit," Match commanded in the manner of a dog trainer. Geoghan dragged a dining chair from beneath the oiled-teak table and straddled it, arms folded across the back.

"I want," Match began, "to talk of cabbages and kings. Ed Naish's strong point, conversation. He loves hearing his own voice."

"If this is about Corny, you know the ropes, I can't discuss any of that with you." Stan Geoghan was conciliatory despite his macho posture astride the chair. "Off the record, it's

been a bolt from the blue for all of us. Not cold in his grave and they're saying the Boss was bent." He widened his eyes.

"Of course he was!" Match was irked at giving way to his irritation, but it had been a long day. "Took me all of a month to suss Cornwallis out, and I was a raw young D.C. Why do you think I unhitched my wagon from his star? Nice to say it was all down to integrity, but there were practical reasons.

"Cornwallis had to have a junior partner. Can't operate the way he did without a subordinate's finding out; best way of shutting him up was to recruit him. I could have been rich, he liked me, but I never fancied selling myself. I should have denounced him. Great career move, I'd have been a pariah to this day, and informing is another thing I never fancied. So I said thanks for the ride, skip', I'll get out here and walk the rest of the way. He understood. We understood each other."

"So I hear," Geoghan smirked.

"No, so you want the Rubber Heels to believe." Match shrugged with one shoulder, a forget-it gesture. "Now you," he continued evenly, "were different. Took you twice as long to suss Cornwallis out after you joined the squad. Once the penny dropped, you told him I was a fool to myself, turning my back

on easy money. Gave him a laugh, you trying to cut me out when I was dead keen to leave anyway."

Geoghan flushed, soft flesh under his chin tautening.

Match went off on another tack. "Funny how the mind works. I say Ed Naish and you go Cornwallis, all-same bacon and eggs, Laurel and Hardy."

The other man sniggered. "Last I heard of Naish, he was running his charity scams and trying to remember what two and two make. Senile, you don't want to go listening to him."

Match decided that if Geoghan rattled this easily, parrying allegations before they were made, then it was a wonder Cornwallis had not come unstuck before. Except he hadn't come unstuck, just died. Fearsome and feared in his time, but that was over—freeing tongues, allowing grudges to be settled. Somebody had rubbished a dead man; possibly one of his paymasters, infuriated by eulogistic Cornwallis-of-the-Yard obituaries in the papers: we shall not see his like again. That's all you know, an informant or informants had sneered. Cue the Rubber Heelers.

Geoghan muttered, "We'll have that drink," making glasses chime as he fumbled in a cabinet.

"Thanks, but I'm driving. Senile? No way to talk about a business associate. Don't bother denying it. Cornwallis treated Ed like a scumbag, but he generally knew where to get hold of him, what he was up to . . . They were thick as thieves. Which they were, of course. If some hound was looking at a long stretch, up popped Ed: he knew a man who could make it go away. Cornwallis was a maestro—evidence lost, never by him, witnesses scared off. Or he'd fit up the nearest warm body for whatever the new client was down for and get him off the hook that way."

Geoghan, treating a gulp of single malt like medicine, claimed, "All news to me."

"Ed Naish is past it. Senile's a bit cruel, but . . . When it came to me I was being put in the frame, there wasn't a rush of suspects. You were Cornwallis's man, you'd need a patsy to take your punishment. I never looked at anyone else, waste of time and nervous energy."

"Soon as you whispered my name to the Rubber Heels, it stood to reason you would warn Ed Naish to vanish until the dust settled. No chance. Ed thinks he can talk his way out of anything. First he tried proving he hated Cornwallis, telling me how the skip' fitted him up one time. That case had nothing to

do with Cornwallis, and Naish knew it. The Ed Naishes of this world don't forget which copper railroaded them—he might as well have pinned a sign to his back: KICK ME, I'M A LIAR.

"Second boo-boo was his calling me inspector. Old codgers live in the past, he's been spinning yarns about me since God was a boy, I am always Constable Matchbox of Cornwallis's squad—Ed loves his plays on words. Suddenly this morning he was up to speed, knew my rank, knew I'm out in the sticks, and I haven't been at Braeburn Park for a full month yet. Which tells me somebody brought Ed up to date recently."

"You're right, Stanley, he's losing it. Had to excuse himself this morning, call of nature, and I took the opportunity to press the last-call-redial button on his phone. Up came your answering machine."

"He hasn't—" Geoghan's capped teeth amputated the rest of the denial.

"Got your home number," Match finished for him. "Just testing. . . ."

"Talk away, I'm fireproof," Geoghan jeered. The scotch was steadying him, "No paper trails, no proof. Naish a convicted criminal, yards of form, and they'll take his word against mine? I don't think so. Cornwallis didn't give me any five thou-

sand quid check, that's the crunch. That's why you will take the weight."

Belatedly alert, he gave Match an up-and-down survey. "No wire," he was assured. "Hear me out, and you'll be very glad of that, Stanley."

Making himself more comfortable, Match resumed, "The famous check, that started me off. Because you delivered it. Either you steamed the envelope open, or Cornwallis told you about it. So when the spit started flying and you needed a dummy, there I was, oven-ready.

"You started getting a dip in Cornwallis's gravy the minute I was off the squad. But you never knew him. Oh, you could recognize his photograph, but better men than you never knew how deep he could be. . . .

"Cornwallis was a villain who happened to be a copper," Match lectured. "Forget morality, loyalty was the bottom line: loyalty to him and each other. I never gave him away, even if I did quit. He appreciated that."

"Don't love yourself much, do you." From a big man Geoghan's childish spite was grotesque. "Corny thought you were a joke."

"In his world I was," Match agreed, unruffled. "Didn't stop him liking me. You are different. Cornwallis had you sussed. Bash your mum and kick kid

sister overboard to get the last place on the lifeboat. And, all due respect to that bravery award that was in the papers, you are a bit of a panic merchant, Stanley.

"Year or two back, maybe a premonition he was only mortal like the rest of us, Cornwallis put his thinking cap on. If he wasn't around, you would run the business. Worse still, if he wasn't around when a wheel happened to fall off, you would panic and stir the spit with a vengeance, looking for a scapegoat. Who might that be? Well, you've always had as much time for me as I have for you, nil. And there was that money he subbed me, which you delivered. Made me the obvious target to be Muggins. So he left me an insurance policy."

Artful raconteur when he bothered, Match paused as though losing his thread. Then he started investigating his pockets.

"The week after Cornwallis snuffed it, I got a solicitor's letter, one enclosure. Two really, note inside the outer packet, don't open this unless you face a disciplinary charge, and another cover, sealing wax on the flap. Sorry to bang on about it, but loyalty again—he knew I wouldn't break that seal without due cause."

Rather as a poker player lays

down the winning hand, Match arranged papers on the glass coffee table before him. There was a buff envelope bearing a Recorded Delivery sticker, addressed to him at home and marked Personal. Alongside it he placed a half-sheet of notepaper with Cornwallis's address embossed in an upper corner. Finally, two sheets, evidently photocopies, filled with the late detective chief superintendent's florid yet neat handwriting. "Read it and weep."

After the first few lines, Geoghan paled. Seconds later he looked up. "This . . . this is all wrong. On my mother's eyes, uh, Alan, this isn't right." He'd had to dig deep for his enemy's first name, using it like a talisman. Match found that comic.

Geoghan went back to the start of the document, cursing monotonously, before skimming the rest. His fingers closed on the pages, making paper flowers sprout from his fist. "This is bad, very bad. Wicked bastard, he must have gone mad. I knew nothing, *nothing*, till afterwards. This was Corny on his own, he did it. All I did, and he made me, I went out to Frank Der Hahn in Portugal. Picked up the money, that was the first I knew of it. I never did know, only guessed, never asked him, it was too heavy.

"Walked right into it. Corny

give me an address, no-names-no-packdrill, you're expected. Big villa, high wall, butler and that. And then it's the Frankfurter grinning all over his face. 'Welcome, monkey, take this back to the organ grinder, he does good work.'"

Geoghan, nearly weeping, sent his empty glass spinning without noticing the mishap. "Do you think I'd kill anybody? Tommy Tanks of all faces, the great informer that the top ranks thought the sun shone out of his backside. Top him, and for Frank Der Hahn, Mr. Loose Cannon? Corny must have been off his head, no money was worth that."

"It did cause a bit of a stir," Match affirmed placidly. "And a lot of aggravation, some of it still active. You and Cornwallis weren't taking much of a risk, though. Two shots in the head, into a car and off you go. Unless a witness saw you actually using the gun, you could always say you went to that park looking for Tommy Tanks, it was one of his haunts."

"Shut up! I had no part of it!" Geoghan's eyes were wild.

"Not what it says there. You know Cornwallis's writing—trying to say it's forged? Looks kosher to me. According to what's down there, the two of you were on a big earner from Der Hahn, offer you couldn't and so forth.

Cornwallis drove the car, you did the business."

Not listening, Stan Geoghan muttered, "Fitted me up, he fitted me up. Why me? We were partners."

"Why?" Match sounded surprised. "He didn't like you, Stanley, how many more times do you need telling? Cornwallis used you because he had to, and because you begged and schemed for it. Where's liking come in? Think of yourself as an old rag, nothing to like about it but when somebody throws up, then a rag comes in handy. You might even rinse it out after, sling it back in the bucket, waste not, want not. It's still a smelly old rag, though, yuck, nasty."

"But me, I saved Cornwallis's life. And let him crack on that he saved mine. Loyalty . . . I can tell what was in his mind. It's like the joke about training a mule, first you whack it over the head with a lump of wood—make sure it's paying attention."

The other man groaned, "What the hell are you droning about now?"

"That confession is my lump of wood. He figured if you tried a stroke on me I'd need it. Here, I nearly forgot." From another pocket he produced a photograph, gloss cracked in a cruciform pattern where it had been folded into quarters.

It showed Cornwallis, Ed Naish, and a burly man with rings on four fingers. To one side, nearly out the of frame, was a naked, presumably female hip and a line of G-string. Bottles were in the foreground, out of focus. The burly man, expression triumphant, was shaking hands with Cornwallis; Naish looked happily greedy, about to pat Cornwallis on the back. To one side of the group, squinting away and looking alienated, was Stan Geoghan.

"That was in with the confession," Match explained. "Takes a bit of getting round. Cornwallis and you chumming up with Frank Der Hahn, notorious criminal. Who had the best reason for wanting Tommy Tanks killed, which is unfortunate for you."

Geoghan was breathing raggedly. "I don't remember any meet, and as for this photo—Corny and Naishy and me, with the Frankfurter? We had more sense. Unless . . . must have been Christmas, we did the clubs, he could have been there the same time as us."

"Sounds good, keep that in the script. Keep that snap as well, it's damaged, I have better copies," Match said blandly. "See where I was going, about a wire not being in our best interests?"

Geoghan, reaching for the



whisky bottle, nodded heavily. His damp glass, pawed up from the carpet, had transferred fluff to his lower lip.

Match said, "I could give that stuff to the proper authorities. I could. Then again, Cornwallis is dead, and Tommy Tanks is no great loss. Maybe you didn't top him, I don't care either way. My problem is this: somebody has to put his hand up to bribery and corruption. They know Cornwallis must have had a little helper."

"I've got money," Geoghan began.

"Bully for you. Go to the Rubber Heels and give them chapter and verse, names and dates and who paid how much, or they get Cornwallis's original statement and one of those photos. This is ugly stuff, Stanley, too ugly to cover up or lose in the works. Senior police officers doubling as hired killers . . . Crown Prosecution Service may well turn down a trial, it's just a dead man's statement and a photograph, but there will be hell to pay."

"I didn't kill him, I'm not a killer."

But you would have destroyed me, Match thought. "Missing the point, Stanley. Billy Tanks is still looking for whoever topped his precious bruv. He's got a standing offer of a grand to any copper passing him useful information—ten minutes after

that package is opened, the switchboard will be jammed with guys ringing out."

"I didn't do it, that's all Corny's lies," Stan Geoghan snarled.

"Might work, though I never heard Billy Tanks was that trusting. On the other hand," said Match, "I can put my aces back in the bank vault. But you have to admit everything else. Cornwallis was earning, you helped. And tell them I had nothing to do with it, ever. In fact, Cornwallis had me transferred from the squad so you two could work without fear of exposure. The one thing you don't tell them is that he lent me money. None of their business, private and personal."

He subsided against squashy leather cushions. "They don't need another police corruption scandal. They want to find out who else was in it with Cornwallis and do something about them. You're through in the Job, but they may leave it at that, let you resign."

Neither of them had faith in that level of optimism. Geoghan, he sensed, was contemplating the plight of ex-policemen turned prison inmates. "Up to you—I'd take the gamble and Tell All sooner than have Billy Tanks after me. I shall save him a grand, by the way—make him

a present of Cornwallis's statement anonymously."

Geoghan roared, "All right, all bloody right, I'll do it your way." And looking around the pretty room, "I shan't do much sleeping tonight. . . ."

"You won't be here." Brisk once more, Match had risen. "Get your coat, no point in putting it off, the Rubber Heels will be glad to work late." He marshalled his thoughts. "Stanley, doublecross me, and I shall be the first to know. Because the Gestapo will still be after me. I'd take that very badly, I might even turn nasty."

**M**atch gathered that Detective Inspector Geoghan had done as he was told when calls started being returned. With apologies: pressure of work, these bloody temp secretaries needed shooting, a department's answerphone had malfunctioned. Confirming this return to grace, Superintendent Richard Dusterton phoned him.

"You're all better now," Match greeted him, not hiding the needle.

"So are you," Dickie Duster pointed out dryly. "Fancy a round on Saturday? Make a day of it, kickoff at elevenish, back to Chateau Dusterton after. The wife's got this fabulous recipe she wants to dazzle you with."

"Then I can't disappoint her." Match added, "You two-faced git, Dickie," but that was after hanging up.

Driving into Central London after duty on the first day of his rehabilitation, he mused on the workings of chance. The chance, two years ago, of watching a TV documentary about violent crime—he'd left the set on when his favorite sitcom ended, then Cornwallis's trademark grate-and-boom tones brought him back from the kitchen and a single's washing-up.

An anchorman was summarizing the Tommy Tanks murder case, Cornwallis nodding judicially at intervals. Match had stiffened, perceiving the slightest tuck at one corner of Cornwallis's mouth, a certain gleam in the eye: "*I know more than you do, boy*," as clearly as if Cornwallis had shouted it. "You did it," Match had whispered, all that time ago when the big man was still alive.

He had experienced a flash of inspiration, at once irrational and wholly convincing. Instinct, intuition, experience, empathy of a kind, all insisted that Cornwallis had pulled off his most audacious, insolent stroke.

But if he hadn't seen that documentary . . . Match, waiting for traffic lights to alter, nearly shivered.

And if he hadn't wanted Viv,

beg her pardon, Vivienne to be forewarned, and if she had failed to accuse Cornwallis of fitting him up, then the counter-move would not have occurred to him.

It had taken hours to forge Cornwallis's confession after Match unearthed an ancient Christmas card with enough handwritten message inside to serve as a model. Match had faltered when the third attempt satisfied him. Supposing Geoghan had taken no part in Tommy Tanks's murder? But then Match caught on—it didn't matter if Geoghan was innocent, the allegation was enough. Just as his theory about Cornwallis, sincerely held, *knowing* he was right, need not be correct.

That, he had understood in the end, was the beauty of the stroke. It was all bluff, and he remembered Stan Geoghan as a pitiful poker player.

The light changed, Match drove on, a spark of excitement kindling. Crazy to feel that flutter in the solar plexus at the prospect of courting your own ex-wife. Vivienne . . . she was another person now.

He'd let fate decide: if she was in, it would be an omen. His luck had to be fantastic, the way things had fallen out.

He had photocopied the fake confession, which disguised the fact that it was written on obvi-

ously fresh paper. He had leaned on a minor pornographer to take an old snapshot of Cornwallis and other members of the squad carousing, rephotograph figures in it, and produce a fresh version in which Frank Der Hahn, treacherous Geoghan, and middleman Ed Naish replaced then Detective Constable Match and others.

The pornographer claimed to be an artist. So he was when it came to aging the rigged photograph, yellowing its back, turning the corners furry from handling, and giving convincing damage to the heavily folded print. Stan Geoghan had accepted its authenticity at a glance.

Big gamble, all the same; though less so against a panic merchant.

Match drew up in a sedate Kensington street. He wanted to tell Vivienne that it was all over, and that wasn't something to be done on the phone. Was he being disingenuous? Well, how shocking.

She still cared about him, she'd said so. Worrying was the same as caring, surely. He would stand Vivienne a meal for no other reason than wanting to spend time with her; no requests, apologies, appeals for financial leniency. She might accept on the novelty value alone.

He was parking just down the street from her apartment block

when Vivienne came out with her arm round a man's waist. Her new hair bounced on her shoulders as the couple descended three stone steps. The man opened the door of an open-topped Mercedes, and she slid inside, even the swirl of her skirt flirtatious. Vivienne's escort was bound to look back before pulling out and she might glance in a wing mirror, so Match pretended to have dropped something, leaning sideways with his nose not far from the floor on the passenger side. The Mercedes had gone by the time he straightened again, faintly dizzy from keeping his head down.

Classy motor, Match made himself observe. Association of ideas set him studying his own car. The clock had stopped again; he had hurried to this

one-sided tryst half an hour behind the rest of the world.

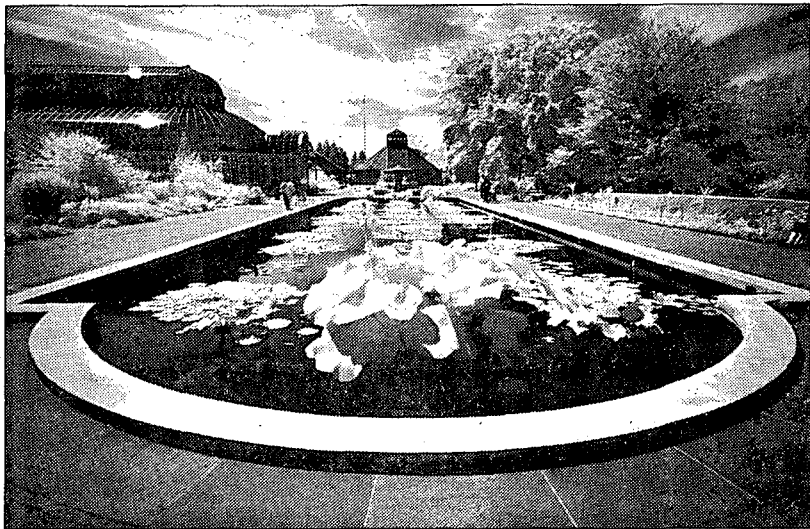
Doomed from the off, he commented wryly. See the funny side, that was part of the Job: the fainthearted or resenters of unfairness were advised that if they couldn't take a joke they should not have joined. Not a bad attitude.

He hit the dash with the heel of his hand, and the clock woke with a start.

Match took a farewell look at the doorway where former Viv had stood. He was still in his rank, doing the only work he knew, and he had fought bloody hard for those dubious rewards.

One thing about the Job, it was always there for some poor sod to be getting on with. "You can't have everything, old son," he said out loud, and drove away.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.*

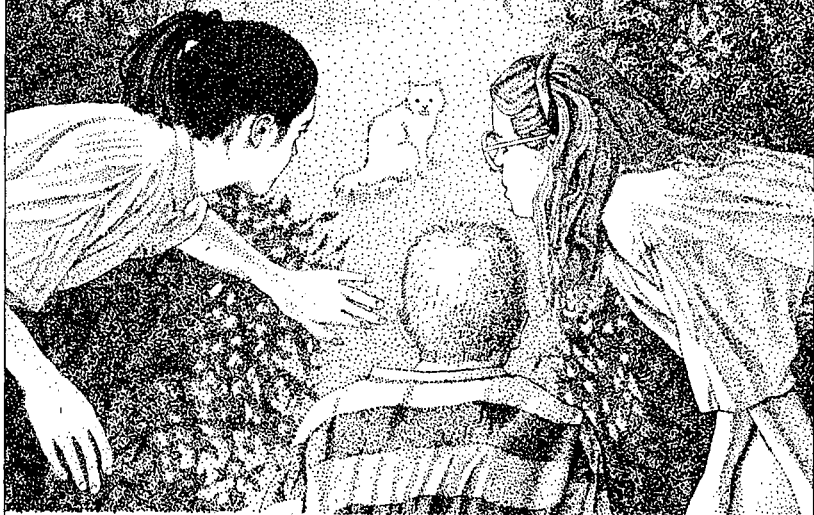
Whatta lily. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

# Trouble Next Door

Donna Hill



*Illustration by David Monette*

*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 6/96*

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I was in our back yard doing my homework on Balboa when I heard the neighbors' car pull in on the other side of their house. It was early for them to be home, and what they did was odd. They carried some boxes indoors and then pulled down all their shades. The wife came out with a lamp and a picture, paused on the porch steps to look around, and scurried off to her car, as though she was stealing the stuff.

Our new neighbors had been strange and secretive right from the first, always turning away if anybody spoke to them. Even the name on their mailbox was suspicious—T. Smith. Our gossip mailman told my friend Sally's mother that they worked in the next town, Beaverton, and never got mail, not even junk.

I'd just gone back to Balboa when I heard a muffled cry, "No, please! I'll be good. I won't—" The cry was cut off.

Everything else was as nice as it could be in June. The blue jay that claims our apple tree was singing his fussy message to the world. A few bright clouds hung in the sky. Our grass had its best fresh-cut smell.

Then everything changed. The blue jay went silent. The neighbors' maple tree was deathly still, but their wild, overgrown shrubbery began to rustle. I felt

creepy, but that was weird because nothing really scary ever happens in our town.

I went back to Balboa, a fascinating, dashing swordsman who discovered the Pacific and had his head cut off for treason, although he was probably innocent.

But something besides Balboa's head bothered me. When the bushes rustled again, I caught a glint of ginger-ale colored eyes peering at me through the leaves. A beautiful downy cat slipped out. She looked at me intently. Where did she come from? I wondered. I'd thought I knew all the cats on our street.

"Are you lost?" I whispered. "Is something wrong?"

I went to see if she was hurt, but she turned away, then stopped and stared at me over her shoulder. When I stepped closer, she did the same thing. It was as though she wanted me to follow her. But then the bright clouds suddenly went dark, and fat raindrops splattered my face. The cat disappeared. I took my work up to our porch.

It's pleasant there, with ferns, a wicker-legged table and a rocking chair where Mother used to sit on summer evenings to sew and listen to the radio. That chair is special. It has a comfortable seat and a flat, curved back instead of spokes, a heart-shaped cushion that



Mother embroidered herself, and something else. It seems to hold Mother's warmth still in it.

I sat rocking, calling up the floor's soothing squeak.

As usual, Mother came to mind, her quiet warm voice, blue eyes, honey-colored hair, pale hands I used to watch sewing, cutting out cookies, playing the piano. Once I asked my brother Clive if Mother came to his mind, too, when he sat there, but he said I was weird. Just the same, I've caught him rocking in that chair and smiling to himself.

The cat was back, at the foot of our steps. Her beautiful coat was wet and matted, but she didn't seem to mind. She was staring at me again. When she saw I noticed, she turned away, then turned back. Again I thought she wanted me to follow her, but just then Clive came out.

"Hey, Tara, what's for dinner?"

Since it's mostly my job to cook since we lost our mother, I had to go in.

We always had dinner the minute Dad got home. He's always tired and usually absent-minded. Unless he's annoyed about something around the house, such as our skateboards left in the driveway, he never says much at the table. I don't mind. I have my own thoughts. Clive has his own thoughts, too,

but sometimes we share. Dad pays no attention unless we get too loud, laughing or arguing.

Tonight I said, "Did you see that cat in our yard? A white angora, very pretty. Ever see her around here?"

"Nope."

Clive looks like Mother, round cheeks, blue eyes, blond hair, although his hair always needs combing. I think it still gives Dad painful memories to look at him. Dad doesn't seem to mind looking at me, though, maybe because he sees himself, tall and skinny, with hair as dark as burnt toast.

"It came into our yard and stared at me."

Clive laughed. "Poor thing must be sick now if it was staring at you."

Clive is nine, two years younger than I am, and a typical brother with a warped sense of humor. I ignored his jibe, leaned closer, and whispered, "If it's a stray, maybe Dad will —"

"No, Dad won't," Dad said. "We've got enough to do around here without pets." We could never count on him to be completely absentminded.

"I don't think it's a stray, anyway," Clive said.

"How do you know if you've never seen it?"

"I think it belongs to Ms. Keljek, probably. Because once she

told me her friend got out against the rules."

"She said friend? Not cat?"

"Right. It could be a kangaroo, for all I know."

"Never mind the jokes. Just tell me what she said."

"She said, 'Don't let my friend eat your dandelions or she'll throw up.' I told her we don't have dandelions, but she's not a good listener."

"Who is Ms. Keljek, anyway?"

"The new lady next door, of course."

"I thought their name was T. Smith."

"Right. But Ms. Keljek lives there, too," Clive said.

"Then why haven't I ever seen her?"

"Because she mustn't be seen. It's against the rules."

"How come you've seen her?"

"Because one day my ball flew into their yard, and I found a gap in their bushes and went after it. Ms. Keljek was hiding in a corner of her porch. I said hello, but she backed into the house. But her bird squawked at me so loud she came out again and hushed him and told him squawking wasn't allowed."

"She has a bird, too?"

"Right. A big strange bird with a yellow beak as big as he is. Ms. Keljek brings him out on his perch as soon as the other two go off. I go see them sometimes, before school."

"How do you know her name?"

"Because she said, 'Keljek, Keljek, Keljek, I must remember my name, but it's against the rules to tell.' She said her bird's name is Prince Charming. But she never remembers my name. I go see her anyway because she's lonely. Once I took her some cake."

I watched my brother stuffing hamburger into his little round cheeks. He can be a pain sometimes, but really he's not a bad kid, down deep.

"She's strange herself, like her bird," he said, chewing. "She mutters. Or sings. Always 'Home Sweet Home.' And jerks her head the way her bird does, looking around as though she's afraid someone's going to yell at her. Once she said she was sorry to break the rules but she's so tired of torn wallpaper. She's nice, though, really. She said, 'You may climb our tree any time you like, Orville.'"

"She calls you Orville?"

"Or Hubert. Or Elwood. Whatever she thinks of." He was telling me this peculiar stuff in a matter-of-fact way.

"What does she look like?" I asked.

"Old. Maybe a hundred. She has long gray hair with a paper flower in it. And men's old carpet slippers. And a dress with purple polka dots, clean but rumpled like she never irons it."

And a black sweater with a safety pin."

"She wears the same thing every day?"

"Right. Even when she said it was her birthday and I asked if she was having a party."

He paused to stuff more hamburger in his face.

"So was she having a party?" I asked.

"I don't know. But she said, 'Of course, Lewis. We must always have a party on important birthdays. Especially like today. Today I'm sixteen.' That's when I took her the cake."

"Are you making this up?"

"If you don't believe me, maybe you can see her tomorrow. She said she'll break the rules and come to the picnic if she can find her shoes. She wants to see me win the gunnysack race. She knows how hard I've been practicing."

"Listen, kids," Dad suddenly said. "About the picnic tomorrow—"

We both set up a howl. We knew he was going to try to get out of it. He hates it, says it's always the same thing, Founder's Day parade and picnic and the mayor's same old boring speech.

**T**he next morning he delayed over breakfast as long as he could, reading the news aloud. He used to read the paper to Moth-

er, but now he does it to us. Talk about boring!


"Dow Jones is down again. New Jersey is reconsidering state taxes. The school board voted on a new gym for Oakwood High. It ought to be finished by the time you get there, Clive. It says here they fear for that kidnap victim, Rosa Perkins, beloved aunt of Philadelphia matron. Seems the kidnapers got cold feet and didn't pick up the ransom money. Here's the program for Founder's Day. Just what I said, same old boring stuff. Well, here's something new for a change. The Beaverton Savings and Loan was robbed yesterday. They suspect a new teller, Timothy Stanton, and a partner. They got away with half a million in three paper bags." Dad laughed. "He looks like an outlaw from Dodge City."

He showed us the picture of a paunchy, middle-aged man with a mop of dark hair and a huge mustache.

Clive laughed, too. "He's not from Dodge City. That's T. Smith right next door."

"He doesn't look like T. Smith," I said. "T. Smith's head is as bald as his face."

"He was in disguise, of course. But he forgot to hide the mole on his nose. What a dumb robber!"



Dad and I had to laugh. Clive can be funny sometimes.

In spite of Dad's delaying tactics, we got to the parade on time, which was lucky because we could have missed the whole thing. The walk from one end of Main Street to the other only lasts about half an hour. Oakwood is such a small town that more people march than stand on the curb to cheer.

My friend Sally and her parents were already there. Dad went to talk to them about the news, mainly the Beaverton bank robbery. Sally watched the parade with Clive and me.

Sally and I are the same age, and we're in the same grade in school. She's even skinnier than I am, and she has pumpkin-colored hair. Everybody thinks we're best friends, since I see her more than anybody, if that's how you judge.

"Remind me to tell you something," Sally whispered with this lopsided grin she gets when she's teasing.

"Why can't you tell me now?" I said.

"Later. Here comes the parade." Sally drives me crazy, the way she loves suspense. It's best to pretend not to care.

"Where's your friend?" I said to Clive.

Clive was looking all around, disappointed. He said, "I guess she couldn't find her shoes."

"What friend?" Sally asked.

"Tell you later," I said. "Here comes the parade."

The leader of the parade was coming into view. That's always our mayor in his open car, with his wife in a flowery bonnet. She smiled, and he nodded right and left, tipping the top hat he only wears for politics. His top hat got cheers as usual, while his driver went slowly to prolong the glory.

Next came the chief of police in his car and six marching members of Oakwood's finest, including our famous bagpipe player in his famous kilt. He's famous because he's a genuine Scot named Angus and a former member of the band of pipers that marches at police funerals in New York City.

Then came our new firetruck, then the high school band pounding, blaring and tooting while their majorette pranced backwards, flinging her baton higher than the lampposts.

Our children's-party clown came next in his orange wig, red nose, and huge flapping shoes, bowing and grinning as he was pulled along by his toy poodle in a clown outfit just like his own. Then came the Boy Scouts and some civic groups marching out of step in everyday suits, which I don't think adds much to the parade.

Finally, as always, came old

Asa Johnson in the sticksteered electric car that he had inherited from his grandmother.

Then we all poured into the street to follow the parade to Oakwood Park for our picnic.

"Don't you want to hear what I have to tell you?" Sally asked. "It's very interesting. It's about the T. Smiths."

"So tell me."

"Later. After lunch."

I don't know why people take her for my best friend when she makes me so crazy.

First we had the mayor. He, his wife, and the chief of police climbed onto the stand and sat between the Stars and Stripes and the New Jersey flag. The band gave a roll of drums. The chief of police cried, "His honor the mayor!"

The mayor waved his political hat to acknowledge the meager applause. Dad mouthed the whole speech along with him. Since the mayor says the same thing every year, Dad knows it word for word.

Clive wouldn't eat anything before the gunnysack race, not even watermelon. My brother is a little plump with short legs and not at all athletic looking, so I didn't have much hope for him. Anyway, we all went to cheer him on.

Ms. Rubicoff, the high school girls' gym teacher, handed out

gunnysacks to the twelve boys and girls waiting to race. They had to stand in the sacks, hold them up to their chins, and toe the mark.

Ms. Rubicoff waved a few over-eager hoppers back into place and blew a mighty blast on her whistle. Then she dashed for the finish line because she was starter, referee, and judge, all in one.

At once two hoppers fell down and were out of it. To our surprise, Clive started hopping madly and was ahead from the start. I couldn't believe it. He stayed ahead all the way with powerful hops and was first across the finish line, yards before the girl who came in second. Clive was red in the face, sweaty, grinning enough to split his cheeks.

Everybody shouted, applauded, and whistled, as much as they had for Angus's bagpipe and even more than for the mayor's political hat. Dad thumped him on the back and said it was worth listening to the mayor just to find out what a grasshopper he had for a son.

Ms. Rubicoff gave Clive a blue ribbon and a harmonica.

We went back to the picnic table. The grownups went on talking about the Beaverton bank.

Sally turned to me between slurps of watermelon. "Want to

know what I was going to tell you?"

I shrugged.

She was grinning in that way that makes me crazy. Her little brown eyes are too close together, and already she needs braces on her teeth. She grins a lot, as though she doesn't know her handicaps.

"Something I saw last night," Sally said. "Guess what."

"I hate guessing. Tell me or not, I don't care."

"A spaceship," Clive said.

"No! Tara, come on, guess. You'll never guess."

"The mayor in his top hat and underwear."

She laughed. "No! Tara, now, come on!"

"I'm not guessing any more, so forget it."

"All right." She paused for another slurp of watermelon. "You know how I am, I get so excited at Christmas and first day of school and everything that I can't sleep and I can't stay in bed, so I get up before daylight and go sit by the front room window."

"So?"

"That's how it was last night. And guess what I saw?"

"I am not guessing any more."

"Why are you so grumpy?" Sally complained.

"You're enough to make a laughing hyena grumpy."

When she laughs at my jokes I can almost put up with her.

"All right," she said. "Listen. You'll love it. You'll be astounded. I saw the Smiths moving away."

I did love it. I was astounded. I couldn't let her know that, or she'd drag her news out forever. I shrugged. "So?"

"Three guys were bringing their stuff out and loading it all in a van. They were very quiet and worked very fast."

"So the Smiths did something nice for once," I said.

Sally giggled. "You mean move."

"Right. And without disturbing the peace."

"I don't think they meant to be nice. I think they didn't want anybody to know they were moving."

Sally stared at me to see if I was impressed. I was, but I didn't show it.

She said, "T. Smith was mopping his head and looking around, nervous, and Mrs. T. Smith kept gesturing at the movers to be quiet and hurry up. When the van was loaded, the T. Smiths got in their dirty old car and followed."

Clive had taken his face out of his watermelon and was listening hard. "Was Ms. Keljek with them?"

"Who?"

“Clive’s friend,” I said. “Old lady who lives with the Smiths.”

“Never heard of her. Didn’t see her.”

“What about her cat?” I asked.

“Big white angora.”

“And her bird? Big bird with a big yellow beak as big as he is. If you saw him, you couldn’t miss him.”

Sally laughed. She said to me, “Your brother’s funny.”

“Did you see them or not?” Clive demanded.

“Not.”

“Then I guess Ms. Keljek didn’t leave,” Clive said. “She wouldn’t leave without her friends.”

“Maybe she did leave, you know,” Sally said. I saw by her one-sided grin that she was teasing again. “Maybe she left in that trunk. Big black trunk. Evil looking.”

Clive’s eyes went huge. My brother is still not very worldly-wise, and he can’t always tell when somebody is pulling his leg. He jumped up. “Oh, terrible! Let’s find Angus!”

Sally laughed. “Your brother’s very funny.”

I said, “She’s kidding, Clive.”

“I am not,” Sally said. “I did see a big evil trunk.”

Clive got up and took his harmonica off behind a tree and began practicing “Home Sweet Home.”

We were so tired after the picnic that we took a shortcut through our back yard. We had climbed the porch steps and Dad was unlocking the back door when I saw something wrong.

“Dad! Our rocking chair is gone.”

Clive wailed. “And Mother’s heart cushion, too.”

That was astonishing because not much is ever stolen in our town except sports magazines and candy bars.

Dad was amazed, too. “Who’d want that old stuff?”

“We would!” Clive said.

“They belonged to Mother!” I said.

“Hey, look here!” Clive said. He pointed out drag marks that led down the porch steps. He flew to the yard. We followed and found drag marks through the grass toward a gap in the neighbors’ wild bushes.

Father, who was tall enough to see over the bushes, said, “That’s strange. The trail leads right to the Smiths’ porch.”

Clive slipped through the gap and dashed toward the Smiths’ house.

“Come back here!” Dad called. “You’re trespassing.”

“Not if they stole our chair,” Clive said. He leaped up the porch steps and peered in the window.



“Do you see our chair in there?” I called.

“I can’t see anything in there.” He rattled the door. “It’s locked.”

“Come back,” Dad said. “We’d better see if anything else is missing.”

We searched our house from room to room but everything else was there, even our TV.

“Call the police,” I said.

“Now, wait a minute,” Dad said. “Maybe the Smiths just borrowed it.”

“Borrowing without asking is stealing!” Clive said, jumping with anxiety. “Call Angus, Dad! Call Angus!”

“I’m sure the police have more important things to do.”

“No, they don’t,” I said. “Most of the time they sit around the station playing poker.”

Dad frowned. “Better not repeat that. Sounds libelous.”

But everybody in town knew it. I myself am an eyewitness. The police station is next to the library and every time I go borrow books, I see officers playing cards right by the window, sometimes with the fire chief and the mayor.

Clive didn’t waste another minute. “I’m calling 911.” He dashed for the phone, but Dad got there first.

“This is not an emergency,” he said.

We both started to cry. “It is to us.”

“All right. I’ll report it.” He punched out the regular police station number. He said, “Hi, Angus? You ready for some professional activity? Or is your poker hand too good to leave just now?”

He laughed and finally told our complaint. He listened a minute, then turned to us. “When was the last time you saw that stuff, kids?”

“Yesterday afternoon,” we both said.

Dad reported that to Angus, adding, “So the stuff must have been stolen last night. Or today at the picnic or the parade, while you were torturing us with those hoots and moans you call music.” Dad was having a lot of fun with our complaint. He paused, listening, then said, “Well, all right. Sure. Fine. We’ll be here.”

He had hardly hung up before we heard the squawk of the patrol car and Angus was at the door. He could have walked over just as fast.

Angus is a tall, heavy, red-faced, redheaded man with the biggest feet in wide-toed shoes I’ve ever seen, but he would hardly put the scare in any kind of criminal because he’s always grinning.

“I was hoping you’d come in your kilt,” Clive said.

“To see what I wear under-

neath, right?" Angus said with a wink at Dad.

"That's an old joke, Clive," I said. "It never was funny."

Angus laughed. "Right you are, little lady."

I like Angus okay, but I hate to be called little lady.

Angus clamped his cap under his arm and brought out a notebook. I saw that he had nothing in the notebook, but he flipped over a few pages pretending to look for space.

"Okay, tell me the circumstances," he said.

"Dad already did," I pointed out.

"Right. But now I have to make it official."

We told him again while he scribbled. I added, "It's got to be the T. Smiths."

Angus muttered as he wrote, "Victims suspect the perpetrators are their neighbors, the T. Smiths." He looked up. "You feuding with them?"

Dad laughed. "Of course not. We hardly ever see them."

Angus wrote, saying, "No apparent motive." He snapped his book shut and stowed it away. "Lead me to the scene."

He examined the drag marks with his flashlight and followed them to the broken shrubbery. He leaned over the shrubs and turned his flashlight on the Smiths' yard.

"They took it up on their porch," Clive said.

"But it's not there now," I said. "So we have to look in their house."

"Can't do that." Angus put away his flashlight and turned back to our porch. We followed.

"You're not just going to let them keep it!" Clive said.

"Well, we can't be sure they have it. The evidence is only circumstantial."

"But substantial, just the same," I said.

Angus grinned. "You're a smart little lady. Want to join the force in about ten years?"

"I don't play poker," I muttered to myself, but Angus heard me and laughed.

"But the chair's got to be in their house," Clive said. "Let's just go take it back."

"Can't do that without a warrant," Angus said.

"Well, get one!" I couldn't believe this stupidity.

"Can't. The judge is in bed by this time."

"You can get it in the morning, can't you?"

Dad hadn't objected much so far, but I knew how he hated a fuss. He said, "Oh, we don't want to put you to all that trouble, Angus."

"Trouble is his job," I said. "Even trouble next door."

"The little lady's right," Angus said. "But it's no big deal. I

just tell the judge what I'm looking for and why I think it's in the house, and he signs the warrant. Then I have to get someone to go with me."

"I'll go with you!" Clive and I both said.

Angus laughed. "Thanks, kids, but the warrant needs two official witnesses. I'll take Ballard. He'll like the change from investigating graffiti."

Clive and I were so upset about our chair that we didn't even think that the Smiths might have taken it with them.

**N**ext morning Dad, Clive, and I went out to watch as the patrol car pulled up. Sally must have seen it from her window because she flew right over.

Ballard, an eager-looking young Afro-American, gave the Smiths' front door a few rings and knocks, then opened it, and he and Angus simply walked in.

Clive looked disappointed. "I thought they were supposed to smash it down."

The search was soon finished. "No sign of your mother's chair," Angus reported. "Fact is, we hardly found a stick of furniture in the place. Wobbly kitchen table is about all."

"Plenty of dirt, though," Ballard said. "Trash and garbage everywhere, newspapers, boxes, bottles, cans."

Angus laughed. "Not a whole lot of recycling was going on there."

"Moldy pizza on the kitchen counter," Ballard added. "Scrambled eggs in a skillet. I don't think the Smiths have swept or washed anything since they moved in."

"That's because it was a hide-out," Clive said.

Sally grinned at me. She knew I was wondering when she was going to spill her news. But she wasn't ready yet. She loves suspense.

"Besides the garbage, the only evidence of human habitation was an old sweater in the back bedroom upstairs," Angus said. "Looked like something from a ragbag."

"That's Ms. Keljek's sweater," Clive said. "She wears it all the time. Didn't you see her in the house?"

"Nope. Unless she was in some other closet," Angus grinned. "We weren't authorized to look in closets. Wouldn't expect a rocking chair to be in a closet."

"We only saw the sweater because that closet door was hanging open," Ballard said.

"What about her bird?" Clive asked. "Big bird with a big yellow beak. If you saw it, you couldn't miss it."

"And her cat?" I said. "Big white angora."

"Nope."

I saw that Sally wasn't going to keep herself in suspense any longer. "I knew you were wasting your time," she said to the officers. She told her story, looking very smug. The officers scribbled it down.

"Can you describe the van?" Ballard asked eagerly.

"It was more like a truck. Yellow, with an eagle painted on it and 'Eagle Instant Movers, No Job Too Small.' Three men were with it, young, like high school boys. But fast workers. I think the Smiths were sneaking away."

Ballard looked at Angus. "Skipping out on the rent?"

Angus shrugged. "Could be."

"I'll check," Ballard said. I'd wondered how seriously Angus took his job, but Ballard was serious enough for both.

Clive said, "But mostly they were running away because they robbed the Beaverton Bank."

"What have we got here, another candidate for Oakwood's finest? Play poker, do you?" Angus winked at Dad.

Ballard was excited. "Describe your neighbors, please."

"Short and fat," Clive said.

"Middle-aged," I added. "He's bald with a red face, and she has yellow hair and a lot of rouge."

"Doesn't sound like the Beaverton gang," Angus said.

"Of course not," Clive said. "They were in disguise. But T. Smith forgot to hide the mole on his nose."

"Mole on his nose," Ballard muttered, writing.

"Bank robbers or not," Angus said, "they shouldn't get away with not recycling."

"Or with our chair," Clive said. "And Ms. Keljek."

"I didn't see your chair in the van," Sally said.

"It must be in the van, since it isn't in the house."

"Ms. Keljek, too," Clive said, looking ready to cry.

Ballard said, "We can put out a bulletin, right, Angus?"

"Urgent, all points," I said. I don't watch TV in vain.

Angus was grinning again. "A regular Miss Marple."

"Would it help to know the license plate numbers?" Sally asked.

"Sure would." Angus turned to Dad. "Do you happen to know your neighbors' license plate number?"


"I hardly know my own," Dad said.

"Well, I do," Sally said. "And the van, too."

We all looked at her gloating face. Angus pushed his cap up with his pen. "You sure, little lady?"

Sally's look was scornful. "Of course."

They stood with pens poised,



but Sally has to tell things at her own pace. "They were parked near the street lamp. And I happen to have very sharp eyes. And I happen to like license plate numbers from everywhere. Once I even saw one from Alaska. And I write them down, like a hobby. But this is the first time anybody's ever asked me for one."

They looked impressed, and she looked so smug I could have given her a good shake. After she told them the numbers, the police went back to their car and Dad went back to his morning paper. We three were left alone on our front lawn.

"Did you see Angus?" I said. "He thinks this whole thing is a joke. He's not going to do anything."

"Ballard will," Clive said.

"But we can't depend on an all-points bulletin. We have to do something ourselves."

"Like what?" Sally asked.

"Go after the T. Smiths before they get too far away."

Sally sneered at my suggestion, but I knew just what to do. At the library we looked up Eagle Instant Movers in all the county phone books. The only one we found was in Chadville, on the other side of Beaverton.

There was a bus right after lunch. We told Dad we were going somewhere with Sally, and

since he was deep in some work he'd brought home, all he said was, "Fine." I don't know what Sally told her parents, but she wouldn't be left out so there we were, the three of us, off to Chadville.

The bus went along to the end of our Main Street and straight into the Main Street of Beaverton. You would hardly know it was a different town except that it's bigger and the names on the shops say Beaverton instead of Oakwood—Beaverton Pizza, Beaverton Unisex Haircuts.

The shade was down in the bank window, but behind the shade was the glow of somebody's desk lamp. Probably the manager, figuring out how much money he had left. He must have some, Dad said, because he offered a reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the robbers.

The ride to Chadville was through a rural area with great trees, houses set far back from the road, and horses grazing. It would have been pleasant if we hadn't been so nervous.

The Chadville depot had only four benches, a ticket window, a self-service newsstand, restrooms, and a public phone.

"Now what?" Clive asked, looking to me as leader.

I brought out the movers' address and phone number.

“Guess we have to ask them where they took the T. Smiths.”

Sally said, “They’ll never give kids that information.”

“Then we’ll pretend we’re grownups.”

Sally sneered, “How? You don’t seem any more grown up than I do.”

I could have argued with that, but I refrained.

Clive said, “You do on the phone, Tara.”

“They’ll ask why you want to know,” Sally said. “You can’t tell them it’s because the Smiths took your chair. They’ll think we’re accusing them of moving stolen property.”

“She might be right,” Clive said.

“So what are you going to do?” Sally demanded. “We’ve come all this way and spent our allowance and you haven’t even figured that out.”

Actually I had, just that moment. “If they think we want to do the Smiths a favor, they might tell us where they are.”

I didn’t waste time explaining. The girl who answered the phone sounded young. In my most mature voice, I said, “May I speak to one of the movers, please?”

“You want to hire the truck?”

“No, actually it’s about a move they already did.”

“Is it a complaint?” She sounded cautious.

“No, not at all. May I speak to the ones who moved the T. Smiths from Oakwood very early yesterday?”

She said, “Just a minute.”

A young man’s voice came on the line. “Jackson. I’m the foreman. What can I do for you?”

“I was a neighbor of the Smiths in Oakwood. They’ve gone off without their cat.”

Jackson laughed. “You sure it wasn’t on purpose? Some people do that, you know.”

“If they didn’t want their cat, why would they take their cat carrier? Didn’t you load a cat carrier in the van?” I took a chance he wouldn’t remember.

He said, “Maybe one of the other guys did.”

Before he could ask them I said, “Or maybe they took the carrier in their car. They probably didn’t realize she got out or something. They were in a hurry, you know.”

“Right.”

“They forgot to give us their new address. I’m sure they meant to, but for now they must really be worried.” I thought I might as well make it a good story. “So I want to take the cat over right away. Could you give me their address, please?”

Jackson spoke to the girl. “Look up the Smith address.”

I could hear her. “Why don’t you phone them first? Make sure it’s okay.”

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When I heard that, I almost hung up.

"Naw, no problem. This lady has their cat."

I scribbled the address, so excited I forgot my grownup voice when I said thanks. Just as I hung up, I heard Jackson say, "Hey, wait a minute!"

"Now what?" Sally said as a challenge.

"We'll go right over and get our chair," Clive said. "And save Ms. Keljek."

"How are we going to do that?"

"We'll think of something," I said. "We've thought of something all day, haven't we?" I was feeling proud of my sleuthing and leadership skills. I went to the ticket agent.

"Mister, how do we get to this address, please?"

The agent took the slip of paper, but instead of reading it, he peered at us over his little round spectacles. "You kids just got off the bus, right? What are you doing here?"

Clive said, "Visiting."

The agent raised himself off his stool to peer down through the bars at Clive. "Relatives?" he asked.

"Neighbors," Clive said.

"He means former neighbors," Sally put in.

Before they could give out any more information, I said again,

"Would you please tell us how to get there?"

The agent adjusted his spectacles and looked at my note. "Oh yes. Those folks just moved here."

It was definitely not smart of the T. Smiths to try to hide out in small towns, I thought. It just can't be done.

"They're on the edge of town," the agent said.

"Very far?"

"No. We're on the edge of town, too, in case you hadn't noticed. Just go out that door and turn left two blocks. That's where Maple Street crosses Main. This is Main, in case you hadn't noticed. Turn right on Maple and go on past the lumberyard. You'll find the house. Five minutes, easy."

The Smiths' new house was white, with an elm tree and a patch of garden behind a picket fence. The neat, thick shrubs at the door and windows were of the sort people are warned against because they might hide burglars breaking in.

"What a pretty house," I said.

"But not for long, with them in it," Clive said.

We crept through the gate to peer in the windows. We saw boxes, a sofa, a TV, and a lot of stuff piled any old way. A black trunk with the lid thrown back was full of sheets and towels.

No Ms. Keljek. No cat. No bird.  
No rocking chair.

"Let's go around back," I said.

Their dusty car was in the driveway at the side of the house. We took the other way around. In back, the windows were higher and the ground slanted downhill. Sally and I could barely see over the windowsills, and Clive couldn't see anything.

"There they are," I whispered.

"Where, where?" Clive said. He tried to look by hopping, something he's good at as he had proved at the picnic, but I held him down to keep him from attracting their attention. The Smiths were drinking tea off a crate, talking in low voices and grinning at each other.

"That's not the Smiths," Sally whispered.

"I guess she's right," I told Clive. "They look older than the Smiths. His hair is gray, and hers is white."

"It's got to be them," Clive said. He hopped up, caught the ledge, hung on and peered in. "It is them! In new disguises. But the man has that same mole on his nose. And the woman has the same yellow teeth and big chin."

Their phone rang. T. Smith got up and took the receiver off the wall.

"Yeah?" he said gruffly. He listened. "We don't own a cat. No,

they're not friends. You shouldn't have done that."

Sally tugged at my shirt. "Let's go."

"Wait. I want to hear what they say."

"We'll have to get out of here," T. Smith said.

Mrs. T. Smith jumped up. "You don't mean move again?"

"We'll load up the car with whatever we can take and go."

"Leave my things? We can't do that!"

"I didn't want to bring all this stuff in the first place. You and your heirlooms. It's junk. But you wouldn't even leave a chair for that crazy woman. Why did you want to give her a chair, anyway? It won't matter to her for long."

I looked at my fellow sleuths. Their eyes were huge. So were mine, I guess. The Smiths must have left Ms. Keljek behind. But what did T. Smith mean about the chair? It could be horrible to think about.

We had started to creep away when the phone rang again. T. Smith answered it, hung up, and said, "Damnation."

"What's the matter now?" his wife asked.

"What kind of place is this?" T. Smith raged. "Everybody poking into everybody else's business."

"I told you we should have gone to New York."

"Sure. Just what the cops

would expect. They probably have New York's finest looking for us right now."

"Who was on the phone that time?" Mrs. T. Smith asked.

"Agent at the depot, asking if the kids got here."

We reached the gate just as the front door crashed open. Out came T. Smith in his gray wig and old-man suspenders.

"Hey, you kids, come back here!" he shouted.

But we fled and didn't stop to catch our breath until we were well up Main Street.

"Now what?" Sally demanded.

"I wish you'd quit saying that," I said.

"What now?" Clive asked.

"We're going to the police."

We walked on. It was amazing how much this town was like Beaverton and Oakwood, too, with the same sort of shops, and the police station next door to the library.

The Chadville police station was small, bright, and bare, with two benches where criminals and victims could wait. But they were empty just then. On one side of the station was an open door leading to an empty inner office, and on the other was an open door leading to a short hall and two empty cells. As in Oakwood, this town seemed to offer very little activi-

ty for the officers of law enforcement.

The only one we saw was behind a low railing at a tall desk bearing a brass nameplate, SERGEANT PILK. He looked young except for the fringe of hair around his rosy bald head. He was chewing a pencil and studying the work on his desk. The work turned out to be a crossword puzzle.

Without looking up he said, "Do you happen to know who discovered the Pacific Ocean? Six letters across. I think I used to know that in school."

"Balboa," Sally and I said together. I hoped that helping him with his work would get us special consideration.

He wrote in the letters. "Right. It fits."

Finally he looked us over. "You kids are new in town."

Clive spoke up. "Right."

I'd thought I was the designated leader of our team of sleuths, but I guess they thought so only when they were at their wits' end.

"In some kind of trouble, are you?"

"Yes," Clive said.

"No," Sally said.

"Not exactly," I said. "But we do need help."

I had been trying to figure out the best way to explain our case, but my team went on ignoring their leader.

“It’s about this rocking chair,” Sally said.

Clive said, “Mother’s rocking chair. Somebody in your town stole it off our back porch.”

“I take it that your back porch is not in my town,” the sergeant said.

“Right,” Clive said. “It’s in our town.”

“And that is?”

“Oakwood.”

He tapped his pencil against his chin, considering us.

“Well, you kids look sane enough. At least you know who discovered the Pacific. But your story has a bizarre element.” He didn’t smile, but his eyes looked amused.

“And it gets even bizarrer.” I told him about Mother’s rocking chair and heart pillow, the vanished Ms. Keljek, Prince Charming and the cat. Sally told him about the secret predawn flight of our suspects.

“Their name is T. Smith,” I added.

“But that must be an alias,” Clive said. “I think their real name is Timothy Stanton. Unless that’s an alias, too, because they robbed the Beaverton Savings and Loan.”

“But the evidence is only circumstantial,” Sally said.

“Substantial, just the same,” Clive said, and told his evidence, mainly the mole on T. Smith’s nose.

“I see,” the sergeant said, considering us again while we stood waiting before him. Finally he gave himself a nod. “I’ll record your complaint.”

He did some brief writing in a ledger, asked us to repeat a couple of things, took names, addresses, and phone numbers. Then he asked for next of kin.

“What do you need that for?” I asked, afraid of betrayal.

“Routine,” he said. “At this station.”

I doubted it, but we had to comply. At last he gave us a verdict. “The problem here is that none of these alleged felonies and misdemeanors is in my jurisdiction exactly.”

I said, “But isn’t there some FBI rule against carrying stolen goods across town lines?”

He thought that over. “State lines, maybe. Don’t know about town lines. My advice to you is to go home and consult your local constabulary.”

“You mean Angus?” Clive said.

He grinned. “Right. Your bagpiper. And assure him that his department will have our full cooperation. To whatever extent is legit.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said, meaning thanks for nothing. We started for the door.

“One more thing,” the sergeant called. “Do you kids hap-

pen to know the eighteenth president? Five letters down."

"Sorry," I said. I did happen to know, but I was a little mad at him. I thought he was just like Angus, taking this whole thing as a joke.

"Ulysses S. Grant," Clive said.

"Right. It fits. I used to know that in school."

On the street, Sally said to Clive, "Why did you help him with his old puzzle? Don't you know we're mad at him?"

"We are? What for?"

"Because he's stupid," Sally said.

"But if you get mad at people just because they're stupid, you'll be mad at a lot of people a lot of the time."

Sally laughed. "Your brother's got that right."

They followed me back toward the bus depot. "What do we do now?" Sally said.

"I guess we have to do what he said and go home."

"To Angus," Clive said.

"No, to Ballard. Ballard is serious."

But we had bad news at the depot. The last bus of the day for Oakwood had just left. "How come you kids want to go home so soon?" the ticket agent asked. "I thought you were here for a visit."

"A short visit," Clive said.

We went to confer in a corner out of the agent's sight.

"Now what?" Sally wailed. "It'll be dark soon. Our parents will be worried. They don't even know where we are."

"It's nearly dinnertime," Clive said. "Dad's making something good for once. I'm starving."

"How much money do we have?" I asked. Pooling what we had left, I found we could either buy hamburgers or call home.

"Let's eat," Clive said.

"Let's call home," Sally said.

"Let's eat and call home collect," Clive said.

"My mother hates collect calls," Sally said.

Clive changed his mind. "So does our dad. He's saving to send us to college."

"Maybe we can do both anyway," I said, showing true leadership. "That policeman told us to go home, so he should call home for us." Showing true democracy in leadership, I added, "So what do you vote we do first? Eat or go back to the police station?"

"Eat," Clive said.

"Go to the police station."

My leadership was needed again. "We'll go along Main Street and do whatever we come to first, hamburger place or police station."

Clive waved goodbye to the ticket agent.

"Don't wave to him," Sally said. "We don't like him."

“We don’t?” Clive said. “Why?”  
“Because he’s nosy.”

“But if we don’t like people just because they’re nosy, we won’t find many people to like.”

“Your brother’s weird,” Sally said.

Sally hurried toward the police station. Clive lagged behind, looking for a hamburger place. I was between them. There was nobody on the street and no traffic because it must have been dinnertime there as well as in our town. Even though it was quiet, I didn’t hear the car pull up behind us.

But I did hear a shriek and turned to see my little brother snatched into the T. Smiths’ dirty black sedan.

“Sally!” I screamed.  
“They’ve got Clive!”

Sally turned, saw the Smiths’ car rolling toward us, and froze. The car pulled up to me with the back door hanging open. There on the back seat was T. Smith in his gray wig holding my little brother by the neck. Mrs. T. Smith in her white wig was at the wheel.

“Get in,” T. Smith growled at me. “Or watch me choke your brother.”

Clive was kicking and red in the face. I saw that I had to get in. T. Smith said, “Call your friend.”

“Sally, Sally!” I screamed. Sally did not move.

Mrs. T. Smith drove up to where Sally stood, paralyzed.

T. Smith yelled at me, “Get her in here!”

I reached out and pulled Sally into the car. She was as limp as a doll, her eyes bugged with fear.

“Step on it,” T. Smith barked at his wife.

It’s funny what you think of at a time like that. What I thought was, this is just like TV.

Mrs. T. Smith stepped on it so hard that we were all thrown against the back seat. She made a U-turn and sped out of town so fast I had a moment’s hope some motorcycle cop would come roaring after us. But no such thing, of course.

Meanwhile, Clive was turning purple.

“Let go of my brother!” I shrieked. “You’re killing him!”

I gave T. Smith a good kick on the ankle and a good scratch on his face. I yanked off his gray wig, and there he was in his bald head. I don’t know where I got such nerve, but it was all so much like TV that I thought I had that sort of part to play.

From surprise or whatever, T. Smith did ease up on Clive. After Clive stopped coughing, he squirmed around and roared in T. Smith’s face. “You stole my mother’s rocking chair! You

murdered Ms. Keljek! And Prince Charming! And the cat! You murderer, you thief!" He pommeled T. Smith in the stomach.

"Stop that!" T. Smith slapped Clive so hard his head slammed against the car window. That settled Clive down and woke me up. This was not TV. This was for real.

Sally began to sob. But I was still angry enough to demand, "Where are you taking us?"

"You just sit still and shut up."

That was all we could do. While Sally's sobs turned to moans, I got a close look at our kidnappers. T. Smith had that mole on his nose, heavy eyelids, and no lashes, like a turtle. Mrs. T. Smith had a crinkly neck and great yellow teeth. They were not a handsome couple.

In a few minutes we were out of town. It was getting dark, and I couldn't see much except trees and black bushes on both sides of the car. Here and there we passed a crossing and saw house lights far off to the side. A farm smell of hay and horses blew in the open window.

We passed a gas station, and then the only lights were our headlights and reflectors on the roadside. After a while a round moon appeared among the treetops and brightened things.

Suddenly T. Smith said, "This is far enough. Pull over."

Mrs. T. Smith stopped on the shoulder of the road and switched off her headlights.

"How can you do this?" Mrs. T. Smith said.

"It's them or us, don't you understand?"

"But they're only children, Theodore."

"Don't call me that. Remember, we're Ted Scott now."

"How can I remember when you keep changing us?"

T. Smith reached across Clive and opened the door. The ceiling light went on. I saw how fierce T. Smith looked.

"Wait!" Mrs. T. Smith said. "Let's just leave them and then it won't be—you know."

"That's what you said about—you know. But when they find her, the police might think otherwise."

"They'll never find her. But they will find the kids."

"You bad people!" Clive shouted. "Take us back to town."


"Get out," T. Smith ordered.

"I won't!" Clive yelled.

T. Smith booted Clive out and threw him in the dirt. I saw that he had a roll of that strong, sticky tape used on boxes. I jumped out and tried to snatch the tape away. He knocked me down. I hit my head on something. The moon and treetops went spinning, and then everything was black.

It seemed hours later that I





heard the car pull away. I was in thick underbrush. Far to my left a frog was croaking. Crickets chirped. Quiet, slithering noises were all around. I shuddered, remembering that New Jersey has rattlesnakes.

My lips stung from the tape on my mouth. My arms and face were scratched. My wrists were bound behind my back and my ankles strapped together so that I couldn't move my feet. I wriggled and struggled and got myself sitting up. I saw my fellow detectives nearby.

I could only hum at them, "M-m-m-m!" They hummed back. At least we weren't dead yet. I turned on my side, and by bending my knees and pushing with my feet, I got to Clive. Using my shoulder, I helped him sit up. With my fingertips behind my back I tried to reach the tape on his mouth, but T. Smith had been devilish with that tape. I couldn't do it.

Sally was whimpering and sniveling. I knew she had to stop that or her nose would swell and she wouldn't be able to breathe. I helped her sit up. I shook my head in her face, trying to make her realize she had to stop crying. Finally she did. But it seemed we were helpless.

Clive began shoving himself through the bushes. He looked back and hummed at me. He meant that we had to get to the

road. But I shook my head. We had been dragged so far into the woods that I wasn't sure Clive was heading the right way. The moon straight up was no help. Then I heard the frog again and knew there must be a pond to the left and the road the other way. I jerked my head to the right. Clive caught on. We all began squirming through the brush.

The bushes scratched our faces, snagged our hair, tore our clothes. Only the thought of rattlesnakes kept me going.

We had a long struggle, breathing hard through our noses, but at last we came out on the road, sank into the dirt, and leaned against the trees.

Clive had hardly rested before he was on his feet. He nodded to us and started to hop. I saw what he had in mind. We were not to sit waiting. We were going to hop to the gas station.

I managed to stand up. I helped Sally up, and we hopped after Clive. But two hops and Sally fell down. I hummed at Clive. He understood. Sally couldn't hop, and I couldn't leave her. Clive went on alone down the road, hopping madly. If only the gas station were still open.

Waiting in the dark, trussed up beside Sally, I began to notice the musty, moldy night

smells. The sounds of wild nature were everywhere, insects chirring, little animals scuttling, leaves rustling in a chilly breeze. A mournful owl hooted at the moon.

Far off a dog barked near somebody's house where there must be children safe, warm, and happy, eating dessert, maybe cherry pie. I felt even more wretched and worried about our parents, who must be worried about us. And I was worried about brave little Clive, hopping down the dark road.

We waited a long time. I felt my wrists and ankles swelling. In a daze of misery, I nearly missed the headlights that came bouncing along the road toward us. We both struggled up too late. The headlights swept past. We watched the red taillights grow smaller in the distance.

Despair settled on me. I don't know how I could have fallen asleep, but the next thing I knew Sally was jumping and humming. Headlights were approaching slowly. A searchlight on a tow truck swept the underbrush and hit us in the eyes.

I heard Clive. "There they are! Tara, here we come!"

Even before the truck stopped, he jumped out and rushed toward us, running, not hopping. I could have cried for joy. But I saw by the light from the truck that he looked terrible. His

mouth and wrists were raw, his face and arms clawed and bruised, his shirt filthy and his pants ragged at the knees.

A burly man in white overalls hurried over to us. "This is Gordie," Clive said. "From Gordie's Gas and Garage."

When Clive remembered that we couldn't say how do you do, he reached up to pull the tape off my mouth.

Gordie said, "Better let me." He smeared something greasy on me, but it felt like my skin came off with the tape.

Sally shrieked when he pulled off her tape.

"Take it easy, kid," he said. "You're all right now."

"I am not!" Sally wailed. "I'm cold and hungry and sore all over. These guys never should have taken me with them."

"Oh, shut up," I said. "Look at Clive. He's not blubbering."

"Well, he's a boy."

That annoyed me so much I wanted to shake her, but I restrained myself. She did look pathetic, with her swollen lips, straggly hair, and scratched, dirty face.

We all crowded into the front seat of the truck.

"You kids are lucky," Gordie said, grinning as he started the engine. "I'd just locked up when I saw this fellow here come hopping like a crazy rabbit, red in the face and making all the

noise he could with his mouth taped shut."

"I fell down three times," Clive said, laughing. "I ruined my jeans."

"And your face, too," I said. He must have landed on his nose. I couldn't get over how brave he was.

"Gordie was great," Clive said. "He's already called our parents, the police, and the paramedics, too."

The paramedics were already at Gordie's Garage when we got there, and so were the Chadville police and a car marked CHADVILLE COURIER. The ambulance door flew open, and two men in smocks jumped down and rolled out a stretcher.

"You won't need that," Gordie said, grinning. "These patients are what you call ambulatory. You'll never see anybody more ambulatory than this fellow Clive here."

Sergeant Pilk and a woman with a camera and a man with a notebook rushed over. Another car marked BEAVERTON CHRONICLE pulled up, and two more people came at us. Camera bulbs flashed in our faces.

"Now just a darn minute," Sergeant Pilk said. "Let the law get the facts here first."

One of the paramedics pulled us into the ambulance while the other held everybody off. He said, "Nobody gets anything till

we get these kids to the hospital."

The ambulance moved out, leaving police and newshounds to converge on Gordie.

Beaverton Hospital was bright and gleaming, its glare reaching out into the dark night. Our ambulance roared into the emergency entrance. The hospital doors flew open, and men in white rolled out two stretchers. Somebody else came with a wheelchair. They looked disappointed to see us on our feet.

We were taken into the emergency room, where doctors and nurses seemed glad for something to do. They gave us narrow beds with curtains between and hospital gowns. I didn't see the reason for so much fuss because the paramedics had already treated all the apparent damage.

My doctor looked like a high school girl. I was sorry not to have much to offer her, so I said, "I also got a bump on my head. So did my brother."

She brightened. "Let me see." She parted my hair for a look. "Yes, a nice little swelling there. We'd better have it X-rayed."

She held back the curtain to my left and talked to Clive's doctor. He ordered X-rays for Clive as well.

"I want an X-ray, too!" Sally wailed from behind her curtain, but they wouldn't authorize one

for her because she couldn't produce a bump.

We were alone behind our partitions when our dad and Sally's parents rushed in. Dad pushed aside the curtain that separated Clive and me and looked from one to the other of us.

"Well, you don't look too bad, considering," he said. "But your dinner's cold. You won't like soggy french fries."

He didn't rave as he usually does when he's relieved after worrying about us, so I think he was really scared.

But behind Sally's curtain, her mother was raving plenty.

"What were you children thinking of, running off that way!" She didn't wait for a response. "You had us frightened out of our wits. What were you doing in Chadville? Police and reporters from all over the county are out in the reception room demanding some answers."

Dad smiled and shrugged. "Everybody's talking about your theory that the Smiths are the bank robbers. Angus said somebody told the bank president and he's coming over, too. The sergeant from Chadville has sent out an interstate bulletin." Dad laughed. "We haven't had this much excitement in living memory."

\*

The next day we three were famous in all the local Sunday papers, with unflattering photos and inaccurate reports.

Once the police got interested, they were amazing. Even on Saturday night, police from all three towns got involved, Beaverton because of the bank, Chadville because of the kidnapping, and Oakwood because, as it turned out, the Smiths did owe rent.

Officer Ballard found out that the Smiths had half a dozen other aliases and were wanted on suspicion of a number of felonies. The felonies all carried rewards for evidence leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators.


"If we get any rewards, Dad," Clive said, "you can be home more. You won't have to work so hard to send us to college."

On Sunday afternoon Sally sneaked over, even though she said her mother thought we were a bad influence. We were sitting at our back yard table drinking lemonade when I heard rustling in the neighbors' bushes and out came the angora cat.

"Oh, they didn't kidnap you after all," I said.

The cat sat down and stared at us.

"Oh, isn't she beautiful!" Sally cried. She jumped up and went



over to pet her, but the cat fled into the bushes.

But then the cat came back and stared at us again.

When Dad came out of the house with Officer Ballard, the cat disappeared.

"Hi, kids," Ballard said. "Thought you'd like to hear the latest. The Smiths were spotted driving toward Canada, but they escaped again. They won't get away for long, though." He grinned. "They're driving the same old car with the same license plates. This time they're wearing red wigs, but T. Smith still has that mole."

Dad said, "The world's stupidest felons."

"Right, but dangerous," Ballard said. "You three are probably not their first kidnap victims. They're suspects in that Rosa Perkins case, where the kidnappers never got the ransom money."

"Somebody's elderly aunt, wasn't it, still missing?"

"Right."

When Dad invited Ballard into the house for something other than lemonade, Clive said, "The elderly aunt must be Ms. Keljek! She thinks she's sixteen and forgot she's married."

The cat appeared again. Suddenly I knew what she wanted.

"She's trying to lead us to Ms. Keljek."

Clive jumped up. "Everybody

get flashlights. We're going to search the house ourselves."

"Not me," Sally said. "That Ms. Keljek might be dead."

But she and the cat were waiting for Clive and me when we got back with the flashlights. We followed the cat to the other side of the T. Smith house. She gave us a last look and slipped through one of the basement-level windows, which were slightly raised. We heard her land with a quiet thud.

"I thought the police searched the basement," Sally said.

"Ms. Keljek may not be in the basement," Clive said. "Maybe the cat just gets in and out that way."

As usual, Sally was ready with the obvious. "But you can't get through there. The window's too small."

We tried the windows and the door on the porch, then the windows on the other side. The front door and windows were already boarded up.

Clive said, "We'll have to try upstairs."

Sally sneered. "How are you going to do that? Fly?"

Clive went to the maple tree by the Smiths' back porch, pulled himself up to a low branch, climbed to a limb over the porch, and dropped to the porch roof.

"Hooray!" I cried. Already by now I had begun to admire my

brother, and didn't even think of him as little any longer.

He tried one window and then the other. "Both locked."

"Now what?" Sally said. She was ready to laugh.

But Clive didn't hesitate. With the butt of his flashlight he smashed a window and broke in the shards of glass that remained standing like daggers.

"I'll let you in." He slipped through the window. In a moment we heard his sneakers come thudding through the kitchen. He opened the door. Out came a foul smell.

Sally backed away. "You're not getting me in there."

I left her on the porch and followed Clive through the kitchen, where a battered table stood among bags of garbage. Garbage was on the floor and in the sink. A dirty skillet was on the stove. We rushed through holding our noses and agreed to start our search upstairs.

There was no sign of the cat as we passed through the house. We began with the little back bedroom where glass from the window Clive had broken littered the floor.

"This must be Ms. Keljek's room," Clive said.

The room had a cot with a blanket and a bare pillow but nothing else, not even a chair or a chest of drawers. The wallpa-

per of faded rosebuds was peeling in strips.

"Look at the cot, Clive," I said. "It's got that horrible packing tape stuck to it."

"How awful! They had her taped in bed."

The closet door was open, and we saw the sweater the police had mentioned but nothing else, not even shoes.

The upstairs hall was bare. The front bedroom had only crumpled papers, dust balls, and a broken mirror.


In the bathroom was an old-style tub with claw feet. A narrow door to what might be a linen closet had a hook at the top, the kind meant to keep children out. We opened the door and found attic stairs.

"The police didn't mention an attic," Clive said.

"They must have thought this was a closet," I said. "They weren't authorized to search closets, remember?"

My heart was pounding, full of hope, as we climbed the creaking steps.

More stuff was in the attic than anywhere else, stuff probably left by former owners when the Smiths rented the place. We found a trunk with the top off its hinges, a cracked pottery vase with two broken umbrellas, stacks of mouse-chewed magazines, a treadle-type



sewing machine, a child's wagon with only three wheels. It was depressing, revealing a family life that was no more. And no sign of Ms. Keljek.

Downstairs in the living room and dining room we found only packing boxes, trash, and rolls of that terrible tape.

In the closet by the front door I found a raincoat.

"They must have forgotten this," I said. When I shoved it aside, a package fell out of the lining. The package was flat, done up in brown paper like sheets from the laundry. When I picked it up, out poured bundles of money.

Clive gasped. "Bank money!"

"Right! See what police miss by not looking in closets?"

We left it in the closet while we went on with our search for Ms. Keljek. Only the basement was left.

The basement door was in the kitchen. The stairs were spongy and creaky and led to almost total darkness and a smell of damp and mice. The only light came feebly from two high, dusty windows, one on each side of the house.

Using our flashlights here and there, we saw a furnace with the door standing open, buckets of ashes, and a stack of tools in the corner. Under one window was a pile of mouse-chewed newspapers. When we flashed our

lights on the papers, something bigger than a mouse scurried away, giving us shivers.

Something worse gave us shivers. We must have had the same thought. The only place left where Ms. Keljek could be was underground.

Clive looked ready to cry. I felt the same, but I said, "Guess we'd better look for signs of digging."

With our flashlights we went all over the basement floor, but the concrete was the same everywhere, crumbling, damp, and cracked but not torn up. We had just decided to search the back yard when I heard a car pull into the driveway.

"The Smiths!" Clive said.

We scrambled up the basement stairs to the back door, but the Smiths were already heading for the porch.

"This is a mistake, I tell you," Mrs. T. Smith said. "We should have kept going."

"And lose all that money?" T. Smith said. "We've been through too much for that money to give it up now."

"But it's only one bundle. We still have plenty."

Sally screamed, "Tara! Clive, watch out!"

Through the kitchen window I saw Sally try to run, but T. Smith was after her in a flash, snatched her, and clamped his hand over her mouth. Clive



and I turned and dashed for the front door, forgetting it was boarded up.

"The basement!" I cried. But the Smiths were already in the kitchen.

"Come out, if you care what happens to your friend," T. Smith called. "We have her in the car."

Clive started to go to him, but I said, "Wait. Sally's best chance is for us to get away and call the police. We'll climb out the window you smashed."

Mrs. T. Smith heard us. "They're running upstairs, Theodore."

They dashed up after us. We rushed to Ms. Keljek's room.

Too late. Mrs. T. Smith snatched me, and T. Smith grabbed Clive. We struggled, but they held their hands over our mouths and dragged us downstairs.

"Get the money," T. Smith cried.

Mrs. T. Smith was panting as hard as I was in the struggle. "You get it," she said. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Clive gave T. Smith a good kick on the shin.

"Ouch!" T. Smith yelled. He reached down to clutch his leg. Clive twisted out of his grasp. Mrs. T. Smith forgot me and tried to grab Clive. We both dashed for the back door. They followed. We dodged around the

Kitchen table, this way and that. T. Smith grabbed the skillet off the stove and swung at Clive.

"Watch out, Clive!" I said. I shoved the table against the Smiths and trapped them against the stove for a moment. We dashed for the stairs. The Smiths were right behind us. We had to go through the first door we came to. It was the bathroom.

T. Smith laughed. "Now we've got you!"

He must have forgotten about the attic. We pushed in and slammed the door in their faces. Clive and I stood on the landing at the bottom of the attic stairs and braced ourselves against the door as T. Smith tried to shove it open. The door only bounced with his efforts.

"Help me," he called to his wife.

Clive and I were trembling and out of breath.

"We can't hold the door forever," Clive said, panting.

I had an idea. I whispered between gasps. "They're both pushing on the door. If we open it suddenly, they might tumble in. We can slip out."

"And lock them in," Clive added.

"I'll count three."

At three, we yanked the door back. T. Smith fell on the landing, and Mrs. T. Smith fell on

him. We jumped over them, yanked the door shut, and fastened the hook.

"They'll soon break that," Clive said.

"Let's seal it with tape. That tape will hold anything."

Clive dashed off.

By now the Smiths were on their feet trying to pull the door open, but the little hook and I held it shut.

Clive was soon back. We crisscrossed the door every which way until we were sure nothing could get it open.

"What are you doing?" T. Smith yelled. He kicked the door, trying to break it down. The tape held it tight.

"Open this door! This is inhuman!" Mrs. T. Smith cried.

"You ought to know," I said. Clive and I were both giggling and shaking with nerves.

We helped Sally out of the car. She was taped up again, poor Sally, and furious.

"My mother's right. You guys are a bad influence."

We rushed home. Dad phoned Angus. Angus and Ballard came in a hurry, siren wailing. They said no warrant was needed this time because of the presence of known felons.

The neighbors assembled to watch, as usual.

Angus and Ballard had a good laugh over how we had captured

the Smiths, but the Smiths were furious. As they were led out to the police car in handcuffs, Mrs. T. Smith raged at her husband.

"Didn't I say we shouldn't come back? Why do I ever listen to you? You bungle everything we try to do."

"Oh no, this is your fault. If you hadn't gone soft over those kids, we wouldn't be in this fix."

Clive and I had not forgotten the gruesome job we still had to do. We slipped back into the Smith basement to get some tools and search the back yard for signs of a new grave.

At the foot of the basement stairs we found the cat.

"She wasn't here before," Clive said.

"But we saw her go through the window. Wait! Outdoors we saw two basement windows on each side of the house. Down here we see one. There must be a room behind this."

When the cat saw she had our attention, she ran under the stairs and vanished between two ashcans.

We found a pair of sturdy shoes with square heels.

"Ms. Keljek's shoes!" Clive said. "They must be."

The ashcans were heavy, but together we shoved them aside. In the brick wall behind the stairs we found a low wooden

door with iron hinges and a great rusty latch.

The cat was there, looking at us and lashing her tail with excitement. She gave us a hearty meow.

"This must lead to an old root cellar," I said.

We could not tug the door open. We pounded on it. We called out for Ms. Keljek. We put our ears to the panels.

"I heard a moan!" Clive said.

We dashed for the tools. Clive grabbed a hatchet, and I took a pick. We beat the tough old door to splinters.

A smell of mold and damp earth met us. Creaky wooden steps led down to a dirt cellar. It was dark except for a dusty ray from one high, half-open window. Under it was a barrel from which that clever cat must have been able to get in and out of the window, just as she used the pile of papers under the window in the other part of the basement.

Flashing our lights around, we caught the old lady in the eyes. She blinked and turned away.

"Oh, Ms. Keljek!" Clive said. We both started to cry.

She tried to smile. "Basil! I knew you'd come."

She was in our rocking chair with her hands bound to the arms by that cruel tape. Her

gray hair was matted, hanging below her shoulders, and her face smeared with dirt. Her ankles and feet in carpet slippers were grotesquely swollen. It was odd, but somebody had put our heart-shaped pillow behind her head.

The cat ran to her and wound herself about Ms. Keljek's swollen ankles.

"Oh, good friend," Ms. Keljek said to the cat. "I knew you'd bring somebody."

As gently as we could we stripped the tape off her wrists. She hardly seemed to notice.

"Prince Charming is very thirsty, I think," she said.

We turned our flashlights around the dank room, and there on the floor against the wall, we found the bird. One of its wings fluttered when the light shone on it.

"He's alive, Ms. Keljek!" I cried.

She looked at me. "Are you a friend of Wilfred's?"

"Yes, in a way. I'm his sister."

We put the bird on Mother's heart-shaped pillow and promised to come back for him.

Ms. Keljek could hardly walk, so it was hard to get her out of there, even between us. Somehow we struggled upstairs. The cat followed, watching. We found a box for Ms. Keljek to sit

on in the kitchen and gave her sips of water.

"Oh, that's very nice," she said. "It's better here. I was cold without my sweater."

Clive and I went back for Prince Charming. We splashed water on his beak, and he seemed to revive a little.

Clive went to call Dad while I stayed with Ms. Keljek and her friends. After Dad helped us get them all to our house, he went back for the rocking chair and the package of money.

We gave Ms. Keljek some tea and toast. Afterwards she was able to clean herself up and put on a skirt and blouse of mine that actually fit, since she was so little and wasted. She looked pitifully grateful.

"Such clean, pretty clothes," she said. "I used to have clean pretty clothes."

I wondered why the Smiths had let her have a cat and a bird.

She said, "Fluffy is my good friend, so when they took her, I had to go with them, too. The man wanted to get rid of Fluffy, but the woman said they didn't have to be that mean. She was nicer than the man."

"What about Prince Charming?"

"Oh, he isn't really mine. Or theirs, either. They had to take

him because he was squawking too much."

That must have been a bungled caper in a pet shop.

Dad called the doctor and the vet and Ballard, who had already locked the Smiths in one of his cells.

The doctor examined Ms. Keljek and said she didn't seem too bad, although dehydrated. He called the paramedics.

The vet said the cat had fared well for herself but Prince Charming would need some attention at his clinic.

Ballard took charge of the bank money. He said of course Ms. Keljek was the kidnapped Mrs. Perkins, and he would tell her niece the good news right away. And it was very likely Dad wouldn't have to worry any more about college money.

"And Sally gets a reward, too, right?" Clive asked.

"Why should she?" I said. "She didn't help us one bit. All she did was whine and cry and sneer and gripe."

"But that was the best she could do," Clive said.

When the ambulance came, the neighbors all popped out again. The paramedics seemed pleased to find a use for their stretcher for once.

My father surprised us. "Don't worry about your pets, Ms. Kel-

jek. We'll take good care of them until you get back."

Ms. Keljek looked bewildered. She turned to Clive. "Where am I going, Monty?"

"To the hospital, just to make sure you're all right."

Sally rushed over to join us, but her mother called, "Sally, you get back here!"

"But we're going to be famous again," Sally wailed.

"Come back, I said. You're too famous already."

Dad rode with the driver, while Clive and I were allowed to ride in back.

"Don't worry, Ms. Keljek," Clive said. He took her hand. "We're your friends. We're all going together."

She smiled. "Do you know the nicest word in English?" she said. "It's 'we.'"

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### **SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":**

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Elmer Oxnam, the carpenter on the top floor, was killed by Alex Pardee, the hardware dealer on the third floor.

| FLOOR | HUSBAND     | WIFE  | PROFESSION  | STATE       |
|-------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------------|
| 6     | Elmer Oxnam | Diane | carpenter   | Wisconsin   |
| 5     | Danny Queen | Alice | mason       | Tennessee   |
| 4     | Bart McCoy  | Flora | plumber     | Texas       |
| 3     | Alex Pardee | Betty | hardware    | Utah        |
| 2     | Fred Rankin | Clara | electrician | Virginia    |
| 1     | Carl North  | Elsie | lumber      | S. Carolina |

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the July issue.*

The man who entered my office could have passed for a highly successful stockbroker. He had close-cropped white hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. His eyes were clear blue, unblinking. His gray suit was unwrinkled despite the muggy summer weather here in Charleston. His bearing and manner added up to a man who was certain of himself whatever the situation. No matter what his problem it promised to be lucrative.

"Mr. Montague Lamont?" he asked clearly but calmly.

"Yes," I answered. "What can I do for you?"

"Your name was given me as someone who can be discreet."

"Your informant was right. Unless murder is involved, I won't divulge anything that passes between us. Now, sir, your problem?"

"I want you to find out what actually happened to the *Laughing Lady* fifty-two years ago."

"Laughing lady?" I seemed to have missed something.

"Perhaps I should explain. I am Brigadier General James Yonge, U.S. Air Force, retired. Back in 1943, I commanded a heavy bomber squadron, Eighth Air Force; at the time we were concentrating on factories producing parts for Nazi planes. We equipped one of our planes—the *Laughing Lady*—with a revolutionary new bomb sight. That plane went down."

"Shot down? Casualty of war?"

"That's what we were supposed to believe, but I think it was sabotaged. All four of the plane's engines just stopped in midair, according to the crew. They were forced to land in hostile territory, where they were hidden and later guided to safety by partisans. Otherwise, I am convinced, none of them would have survived to tell about it—except, perhaps, one of them. The special bomb sight was never found. The plane itself disappeared, either repaired and flown out by Luftwaffe pilots or dismantled and removed piecemeal. That bomb sight could still be a threat to the free world if sold into the wrong hands."

"You suspect someone in particular?" This was getting interesting.

"It could have been the crew chief at the airfield. Or it might have been the pilot, copilot, navigator, or bombardier while making last-minute preflight checks."

"Excuse me, sir," I said apologetically, "but this sounds like a matter for military intelligence."

"Who would do what, Mr. Lamont? Unnecessarily grill four innocent heroes, men who risked their lives defending freedom?" The general's back perceptibly stiffened. "No, I came to you hoping to discover the guilty person before making any accusation."

"But why wait all these years?"

"Because one of the suspects talked in his sleep."

This was getting more bizarre by the minute.

"Yesterday," he continued, "I got a phone call from a woman who identified herself only as 'Beatrice.' She is evidently deeply worried by something her husband said in his sleep, that he was responsible for the *Laughing Lady's* going down and that he was paid a million dollars for doing so."

I sucked in a deep breath. This was *big*. "Any suggestions about where I should start, sir?"

"This mysterious Beatrice—whom I believe to be sincere and patriotic—told me that the crew of the *Laughing Lady* is holding a reunion here, starting today, at the Hyatt Regency."

"Er . . . sir . . . I hate to bring up the matter of my fee—"

"Whatever it costs, I'll pay." He opened his wallet and laid five thousand dollar bills on my desk. Then he rose, turned, and left.

At the hotel I asked the desk clerk where the military reunion was being held.

"Just five gentlemen in the party, sir," he said. "They're outside at the pool right now."

Sure enough, at poolside I found five men in their seventies enjoying late afternoon drinks with their wives. I introduced myself to one of the men, who said he was Mr. Norris.

"Vacation?" I asked innocently.

He laughed. "Not exactly. Just a bunch of old World War II vets getting together. Since we're all from the Midwest, it was no big deal. We were all involved with a bomber that went down behind the lines—the *Laughing Lady*. That's our excuse for having a little party."



(1) "George, our old bombardier (he was a captain then), and I are married to Beatrice, Claudine, and Angelica (who's not the lady from Sandusky)," he told me.

(2) I strolled over to one of the wives, who turned out to be Daphnia. "Yes," she said with a bit of a frown, "all our men want to talk about is that old war and what heroes they were. The lady from Sandusky, the old pilot's wife (who's always reminding the rest of us that her husband was a colonel), and I married Mr. Kaplan, Mr. Langham, and Mr. Monroe just after the war."

(3) The man named John declared, "Karl, Frank (who's not Mr. Kaplan), and I are Elaine's husband, the man living in Toledo, and our old navigator, who was then a lieutenant—silver grade."

(4) The man named Henry told me, "I wasn't the bombardier on that flight. Karl and I both courted Daphnia, but she ended up marrying another of our outfit."

(5) In conversations I learned that one couple came from Detroit and one had the last name of O'Toole. Then I talked to Mr. Monroe, who said, "Don't confuse me with Claudine's husband over there. John, the man from Reading (who's not married to Angelica), and I were the pilot, copilot, and crew chief, who was a master sergeant."

(6) George stated, "I wasn't the pilot on that plane. The pilot doesn't live in Petersburg."

(7) Mr. Norris explained that he wasn't the copilot, who had just been promoted to major. "Very proud of his new gold oak leaves, he was. Not that rank made much difference to us, then or now."

Now I was certain which wife was Beatrice, and the name of her husband and his former rank, as well as what he did on the ill-fated *Laughing Lady*. I maneuvered her aside. "We know about your husband," I announced in a low voice. "Why do you think he did it?"

She appeared on the verge of breaking down. "The money, I guess. He always wanted more money. Believe me, I didn't suspect a thing until he started talking in his sleep. Now he scares me. What other secrets might he be hiding from me? B-but," her lip quivered, "he was a good husband most of the time. What will happen to him?"

"That's for the authorities to decide, Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_." Suddenly I felt very sorry for the woman.

*Who was the traitor who sabotaged the plane for money?*

FICTION

# TEAMWORK

John M. Floyd



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 6/96

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“Where’d you go, Martin?” Shorty asked.

Martin Rhodes was sitting in the passenger seat of the Honda, hunched down into his overcoat watching the foggy night go past. “What?” he said.

Alton Purvis—Shorty to his friends—kept his eyes on the road, his hands clamped to the wheel. “You heard me. Back there at the office, while Steffy and I were hauling the box out of the safe, you disappeared. You left us without *cover*, Martin.” Shorty paused, his jaw muscles twitching. “Where’d you go?”

Martin studied him impassively for a moment. “Didn’t Steffy tell you?”

“Tell me what?” As if on cue, both men turned and glanced into the back seat where Stephanie Purvis lay sleeping. She had been sleeping for the past fifty miles or so, ever since the three of them had ditched the Ford and stolen the Honda.

“Didn’t tell me *what*?” Shorty asked again.

“I went to the back door,” Martin said. “I thought you knew that.”

“The back door,” Shorty repeated. “Very interesting.” Keeping his eyes on the misty highway, he reached over to turn on the defroster. “You know why that’s interesting, Martin? The back door didn’t need watching. The back door was locked, from the inside. I found that out in about two seconds, from the lady in charge of the vault; I would’ve thought you’d have been able to find that out yourself in the two days you and Steffy spent casing the place.”

Martin just looked at him, saying nothing. Shorty Purvis was an ex-wrestler, and tough as nails; Martin was a much larger man, especially in his baggy overcoat, but not nearly as aggressive. It had always been understood that Shorty was the boss. “What we found out,” Martin said finally, “was where they kept the goods.”

“True enough,” Shorty admitted, reaching down absently to touch the cold steel of the strongbox on the floorboards beneath his knees. “But the fact is, you *left* us, Martin. The back door wasn’t part of our plan. In the time you were gone, one of the office guys could’ve hit me on the head from behind, or *shot* me, for cryin’ out loud.”

Martin, looking bored, turned to stare through the windshield. “Well, nobody hit you, or shot you either. Let it go.”

Both men fell silent. For several minutes the only sound was the hum of tires on the pavement. The lights of a town appeared ahead, fuzzy and yellow in the fog.

“We were supposed to be a team,” Shorty murmured. “You and me and Stef. But a man who won’t follow orders. . . .” He shook his

head. "Something about you scares me, Martin."

Martin was quiet a moment. "I think what scares you about me," he said, "is asleep in the back seat right now."

Shorty looked at him sharply, started to reply, then changed his mind. His face was an eerie yellow-green in the glow of the dashboard lights. After a pause he said, "She's *my* wife, Martin, not yours. And now that you mention it, you two've been spending a lot of time together lately—"

"Casing the office was *your* idea, Shorty. Remember? You asked us to do it, and we did."

"You sure that's *all* you did?"

A long silence passed. Martin studied the driver's profile as the words hung there in the air between them. When he spoke again, his voice was low and tight.

"You want me to leave, Shorty? Is that what you want?"

Shorty didn't answer. Outside, the fog was thickening.

"I thought we trusted each other," Martin said.

Still no reply.

Abruptly Martin turned away, his face darkening. "There should be a truck stop just ahead," he said. "Let me out there."

Shorty sighed. "Look, Martin—"

"I said let me out, okay? There it is, on the right."

The brightly lit building looked like an island in the shifting fog. Shorty turned the wheel, eased the Honda in beside a bank of gas pumps, and cut the engine. In the rear seat Steffy stirred once and was still again. Her rhythmic breathing was the only sound.

"What about your share?" Shorty asked dully.

Martin Rhodes was buttoning his long, bulky coat. Without looking up, he said, "What about it?"

"We'll have to cut the lock off the strongbox. That'll take time, and a safe place."

Martin thought that over. "When it's done," he said, "just send my share to my dad's house, in L.A. Steffy has his address." Opening the car door, he turned and looked one last time at the sleeping form on the back seat. He sighed. "Tell her goodbye for me, Shorty. She was a good friend."

"Martin—"

"So long, Shorty."

Having said that, Martin got out of the Honda and shut the door. Shorty watched him walk through the chilly mist toward a group of men leaning against a row of parked tractor-trailers. Gathering his

coat close about him, Martin spoke for a moment to the truckers; the first two shook their heads and pointed north, but the third nodded. A minute or two later, Martin and the third man walked together to one of the big rigs, where Martin, smiling his thanks, climbed up and into the passenger seat. With a low, throaty rumble, the eighteen-wheeler pulled out of the station and onto the highway, heading south. It vanished immediately into the fog.

Shorty sat there for a long time, staring at the spot where he'd last glimpsed the truck's red taillights. In his mind's eye he could see the intersection with I-59, a half mile away. A right turn there would lead to New Orleans, a left to Meridian and Birmingham; straight ahead was the Gulf Coast. He had no way of knowing which way the truck had taken.

Not that it mattered now, he thought. The important thing was, Martin was gone.

Shorty drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. With a last glance at his sleeping wife, he got out of the Honda, filled the tank, made sure the doors were locked, and walked into the building to pay for the gas and visit the restroom. When he returned to the car, Steffy was awake and sitting up front in the passenger seat.

"Well," he said, climbing in. "Welcome back to the living. You feel okay?"

She stretched like a cat, then looked at him and grinned. "I feel rich," she said.

"That's because you *are* rich. At least you will be, once we convert it all to cash."

Her smile grew wider. Though she was well past thirty, Stephanie Purvis still looked like a sixties flower child: straight blonde hair, granny glasses, an ankle-length dress, no makeup. As Shorty watched her, she took a plastic barrette off the dashboard, put it between her teeth, and reached up with both hands to pull her hair back. "I've been thinking about that," she mumbled around the hairpin, "and I've decided that anybody who'd believe for two days that Martin and I were security consultants—" she stabbed the barrette into her hair and smoothed it out "—deserves to be robbed. What do you think?"

"I couldn't agree more," he said, trying to sound casual.

She yawned once, then looked around. "Where is Martin, anyway?"

Shorty hesitated. "Inside, I guess. He's been in there a while, though . . ."



"He'll be back," she said. She stretched again, then leaned back and propped her bare feet on the dash.

"How do you know?"

She turned to look at him, puzzled. "What?"

"How do you know he's not planning something? Calling his buddies, maybe, to gang up on us?"

"Because I know him, that's how. If we trust him, he'll trust us."

Shorty said nothing. Their eyes held for a long moment. Then, suddenly, her puzzled expression vanished. Understanding dawned.

"You think there's something between us," she said. "Between me and Martin." She looked amused.

He just stared back at her.

With a sigh she said, very clearly, "Martin's a friend, Shorty. Nothing more. Besides, he's leaving in a day or two anyway."

Shorty blinked. "He's leaving?"

"That's what he told me."

"Alone?"

"I guess so. Unless you're planning to leave with him." For the first time there was an edge to her voice. Shorty realized it was time to back off.

"Okay," he said, frowning. "Sorry. But . . . how is it that you know his folks?"

"His folks?"

"He told me you have his father's address."

Steffy laughed aloud. "Well, I *don't*."

"You don't . . . ?" As that news sank in, Shorty's face changed. His eyes took on a dreamy, faraway look.

"Then there's nothing I can do," he murmured to himself. "If there's no place to send it . . ." A slow, cunning smile appeared on his lips. "We get to keep it *all* . . ."

"What are you talking about, Shorty?"

He blinked, and his eyes cleared. Looking guilty, he said, "What I meant was . . . well . . . he really *has* been in there a long time, Stef. I don't think we should hang around here much longer—"

"Well, we can't just leave him." She turned to check out the lighted station. "We're a team, Shorty, you said so yourself. And a team sticks together."

"Like today?" he asked.

She looked at him. "What?"

"Why'd he leave us today, Stef? Why'd he go to the back door?"

That caught her off guard. "He didn't tell you?"



"Tell me *what*?"

She studied his face. "My God, you really don't know, do you. I thought *Martin* had told you, and he must've thought I had—"

Shorty's cheeks reddened. "Just *tell* me, dammit!"

But she stayed quiet a moment, watching him thoughtfully. "Let me ask you one thing first. Why do you think we haven't seen any cops tonight?"

"Cops? What do you mean?"

"Think about it a minute," she said. "Why is it we haven't seen one single sign that they might be after us?"

"I don't know . . ." He frowned, unsure of what she was getting at. "We switched cars, for one thing—"

"That helped, sure. But the fact is, three people don't just put on ski masks and walk in and steal a million bucks' worth of rare diamond jewelry from a museum office and get away that easy. There should've been roadblocks all over the state by now."

He just stared at her, waiting.

"They're not all that worried about catching us," she said patiently, "because they don't know we stole the jewelry. They think we stole a boxful of bricks from their safe."

"Bricks?"

"The diamonds weren't really kept in the safe, Shorty. That's what *Martin* and I found out yesterday. They were hidden in a broom closet beside the back door."

Shorty's mouth dropped open. "You mean . . . when *Martin* left . . ."

She nodded. "He went to get the diamonds. You and I were the diversion."

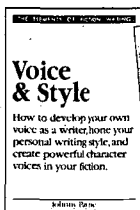
"But . . ." Shorty's eyes, wide as golf balls now, drifted down to the strongbox. "If the diamonds aren't in *there* . . ."

Steffy nodded again. "That's the beauty of it. When the three of us left together, all they saw us take with us was the strongbox. They're probably still laughing, and don't even know yet that their precious jewels are gone. Pretty good, right?"

Shorty was still stunned. "That's not what I mean," he blurted. "If they're not in the box . . . where are they?"

She grinned. "In *Martin's* overcoat," she said. "You could hide an elephant in those pockets."

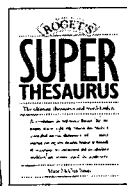




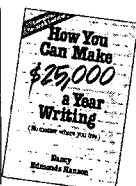
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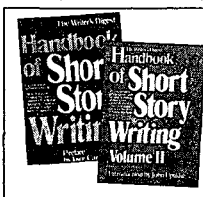
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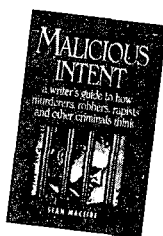
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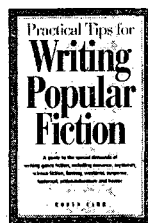
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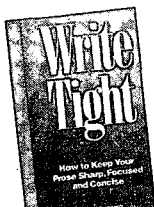
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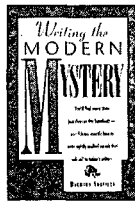
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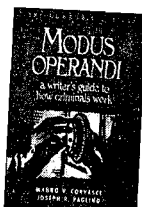
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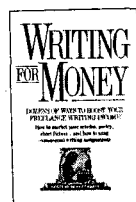
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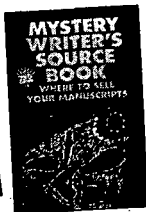


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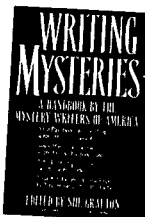
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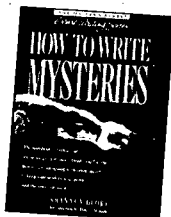
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FICTION

# MY GOOD DEED

William F. Smith

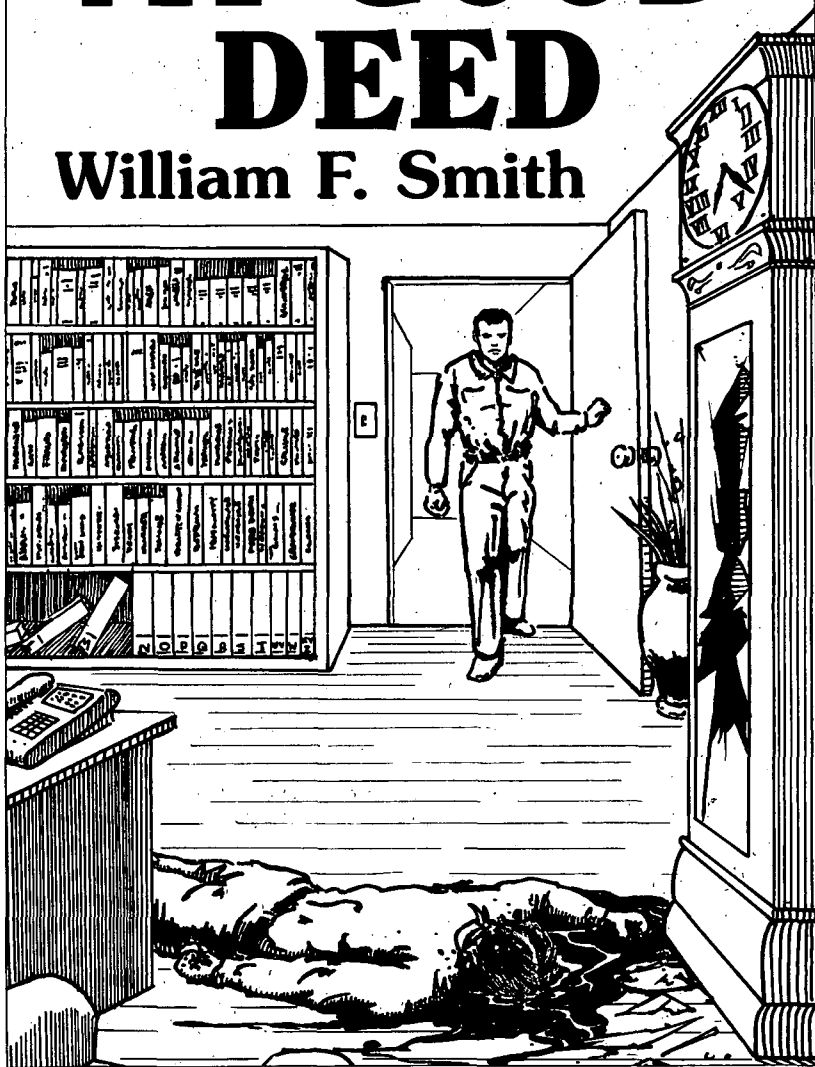


Illustration by Steve Garcia

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 6/96

**G**ordon Nelson's death hit rather close to home. Right next door to be specific. At ten past nine in the evening, give or take a few seconds. I was watching a rerun of *Gunsmoke* on Channel 56 when Janice's sudden, frantic appearance in my den/office drowned out an important conversation between Matt Dillon and Festus and startled the hell out of me.

"Something terrible has happened!"

When my heartbeat dropped back down below a hundred, I didn't try to suppress my sigh of annoyance. "What is it now, hon? Laundry tub in the garage overflow again?"

"Gordon's dead! Nora just called. We have to go over!"

"Hold on a second. Give me a chance to turn off the TV, for heaven's sake." I pushed the red button on the remote, sending the small TV screen into dark gray oblivion. We hurried out the front door and crossed the Nelsons' unkempt lawn. Nora was waiting on the porch.

"Thank God you've come." She opened the door wide. "In the den. He's been shot."

I started down the hall, then believing it would be better if Janice didn't see the corpse stopped abruptly before reaching the door. Janice, following close on my heels, ran into me. "Ouch! Give a signal, darn it!"

"Sorry. You shouldn't have been tailgating." I knew my inquisitive wife was dying to get an eyeful. I was trying to come up with a diplomatic way to dissuade her when Nora came to my rescue.

"Help me into the living room, Jan," she said. "I'm feeling light-headed."

From the doorway of the den I surveyed the room. Gordon Nelson's body lay prone near his desk. A massive amount of blood had seeped out of his wound onto the parquet floor. The glass on the grandfather clock against the wall was shattered, the pendulum hanging straight down—the little hand just past the six and the big one midway between the four and the five. The bullet had entered Nelson's neck on the right side and exited on the left, hitting the clock and causing it to stop at precisely the time of death. I started to go in but changed my mind. I had seen enough, and I knew the Homicide officials would not think kindly of me if I inadvertently contaminated some evidence, so I headed back to the living room. Nora was crying gently, and Janice was endeavoring to comfort her. Both looked up. Nora wiped her eyes and made an effort to bring herself under control.

I asked the obvious question. "Did you call the police?"

She put her hand to her mouth as if the thought had never occurred to her. Her voice trembled. "When I found Gordon like that, all I could think of was to call Jan."

"All right. I'll do it." Nora looked terrible. Her normally rosy complexion was pale and drawn, her hair was in disarray, her eyelids drooped. She was near collapse. "Do you have any sedatives?"

"In the medicine cabinet."

"Nora, you're obviously in no condition to talk to the police tonight. Go with Jan, take a dose of the sedative, and try to get a good night's sleep in our guest room. Your head will be much clearer tomorrow. As your lawyer, I'm advising you to answer no questions unless I am present. Understand?"

"Of course."

"Jan, will you go with Nora, get her settled, and stay with her? The police won't like her not being here, but that's their tough luck."

After the two had gone, I called Homicide to report the murder; then I sat in the living room, awaiting their arrival, and tried to figure out just what had happened. Six minutes later Lieutenant Roger Price and Sergeant Kerry Stuart arrived.

I knew them both well from previous encounters. Price, slightly plump, medium height,

resembled a priest more than a homicide cop. He was an intelligent, honest, patient fellow whose soft-spoken manner and mild appearance often induced suspects to confide in him. I knew from experience, however, that his cherubic face could undergo a swift and terrible transformation. Stuart, his tall, gangling partner, was methodically efficient.

After I gave them a brief summary of the situation, Price sent Stuart to check outside the house. "Damn it all, West," he growled, glaring at me with disgust, "you had no right to ship Mrs. Nelson off to dreamland in your guest room. You may be her lawyer, but you're sure as hell not her doctor. The chief's going to blow his stack when he finds out." He could turn his anger off as quickly as he could change TV channels. In his usual mild voice he said, "Okay, let's take a gander at the corpse. Did you, by any chance, enter the room?"

"Just looked in from the doorway. It was plain enough that Nelson was dead. I knew you wouldn't want the integrity of the crime scene compromised."

"Thanks so much for the consideration," he retorted, not trying very hard to conceal the fact that he didn't believe me. "All right, counselor, do you mind

remaining in the hall while I do some scrutinizing?"

He opened the leather case that dangled from a shoulder strap, took out a small camcorder, and, standing in the doorway, videotaped the entire room, first a panoramic view, then closeup shots, zooming in on the body. He entered the room and repeated the procedure. Coming back into the hallway, he said, "Forensics will be here soon, but I like to have a first-on-the-scene video for my own use. Comes in real handy," he added, clearly proud of his achievement. He slid the camcorder back into its case. "What do you think happened here?"

"I can't be sure. Nelson's been having some financial difficulties for several months—he lost his job four months ago. Maybe he couldn't take it any more, waited until his wife was out of the house, and shot himself."

"No dice, West. A suicide isn't going to shoot himself in the neck. The temple, yes, or he'll put the gun in his mouth. Anyway, you may not have noticed—but I doubt it—there's no gun in the room. I'd say that rules out suicide, wouldn't you? Now tell me, counselor, who's the prime suspect when a spouse is murdered?"

"You're dead wrong there, lieutenant. Nora Nelson has a perfect alibi. I know for a fact

where she was at the time of death. She was attending a Jenny Craig workshop and counseling session with my wife. I didn't get home until six forty, but my wife tells me that she and Nora left here at a quarter to six. They returned shortly before eight. Nora talked with my wife outside for several minutes, then came in the house." (I think I should state here that I didn't believe my beautiful twenty-seven-year-old wife needed to be enrolled in a weight-control program, but she was of a different opinion. When we were married three years ago, she was a skinny little thing, but in what seemed like no time at all she blossomed into what I considered perfect proportions. Maybe she felt she'd keep on blossoming if she weren't careful.)

"That's very interesting. Your call didn't come into headquarters until well after nine. How do you explain that?"

"Nora couldn't have killed him. She was, as I said, with my wife at the time he died."

Price was not convinced. "Maybe, maybe not. You're assuming he was killed at the time shown on that clock. I've solved several cases in which timepieces were altered." He fixed me with a laserlike stare. "I could have questioned Mrs. Nelson tonight if you hadn't decided

to play doctor. Now I'll have to wait till tomorrow to hear what she has to say." He moved forward, forcing me to retreat down the hallway. "Well, counselor, the forensics team and the M.E. will be arriving shortly. I'm sure you wouldn't want them stumbling over you. Why don't you just trot along home? I'm going to call in some extra men to canvass the neighborhood for witnesses, but I'll instruct them to avoid your domicile. I'll be in touch sometime tomorrow. Don't plan on sleeping late."

Janice was on pins and needles when I got back. "Well?" she demanded.

"How's Nora?"

"Asleep, thank goodness. What's going on over there?"

"Nora is Lieutenant Price's prime suspect. He thinks she was slow in notifying us of Gordon's death. I wish I knew why she waited so long. But I'm certain he was killed about six twenty-five. It's a good thing she was with you then."

Janice bit her lower lip and looked sideways. "That's just it, Fred. When we got to the mall, Nora said she wasn't really interested in the program. She just wanted a chance to get away from Gordon for an hour or so. He's been home almost twenty-four hours a day since he cracked up his car."

"He had an accident?" My raised eyebrows seemed to surprise her.

"Didn't you know? He ran head-on into a lightpole one night last week. Fortunately he wasn't hurt and was able to coax the car home. Nora thinks it needs a lot of work. He's been keeping it in the garage until they can afford to get it fixed."

"Doesn't he have insurance?"

"Yes, but the deductible is seven hundred and fifty dollars. Nora thinks he was drunk."

"Hmmm."

"Anyway, she spent the time shopping at the mall, then met me at Jenny's."

"Good. She'll have a sales slip with the date and time on it."

"Unfortunately, she didn't buy anything. But I did after I left Jenny's. I could give her one of mine."

"The time wouldn't be right, and I couldn't condone that anyway."

"What difference does it make? So she was out of my sight for a while."

"A lot. Lieutenant Price is right to be suspicious. You know darned well Nora took much too long to tell us she'd found the body."

"She could have fainted and been unconscious."

"I'll ask her in the morning."

I peeked out the front window and saw that several official



cars had arrived next door. The forensics team and the M.E. were no doubt doing their thing. A few minutes later a couple of uniformed officers began knocking on doors in the neighborhood, but they skirted mine.

**N**ora didn't come down to the kitchen until ten the next morning. Having obviously made use of Janice's beauty products, she looked radiant, much younger than her forty-six years. Gone were the sallow complexion, the mussed hair, and the puffy eyes.

Janice smiled at her approvingly. "You look great, Nora. Completely refreshed. I'm not going to allow Fred to ask any questions until you've had something to eat." Whereupon she promptly set a breakfast of scrambled eggs, sausage, toast, and orange juice on the kitchen table.

I waited until Nora had finished her meal before speaking. "Nora, you got home before eight, but you didn't call us until after nine."

She looked down at the empty plate; it took a long ten seconds for her to marshal her thoughts. "After Jan dropped me off, I went into the kitchen to fix my supper. I didn't bother to tell Gordon I was home. I knew he'd be in the den with the door

closed, watching a video he brought home. It was one of those horror movies I don't even like to get a glimpse of. After I ate, I cleaned up the mess he'd left in the kitchen and waited until I thought the movie would be over. When I opened the den door, I saw him lying there in all that blood. It was such a shock I got all woozy and fainted." (Janice gave me her uppity I-told-you-so look.) "When I came to, I went in the room, confirmed that Gordon was dead, and called Jan."

"Did you touch anything in the den?"

She thought for a few seconds, avoiding my eyes. "I don't think so. I used the kitchen phone."

"While you were strolling around the mall, did you see anyone you knew? Did you talk to any salesperson who might remember you?"

"No, I just looked around in Robinsons-May and a couple of other stores. They were all crowded."

I'm sure my disappointment showed. "Lieutenant Price called me early this morning. He wants to see you downtown at four this afternoon. You can go back to your house now if you like. I imagine Jan is anxious to go with you. The den is sealed, so don't go in there. I'm representing a client in court at eleven on a minor matter and

have a few other things to take care of. I should be back about three. Then we'll go see Lieutenant Price."

"Where's Gordon now?"

"At the county morgue. It may be a while before the body can be released."

**T**he interrogation room into which Lieutenant Price led us was rather austere. It contained a single oak-laminated table with four straight-backed chairs on one side and two on the other. A phone was attached to the wall near the door. Nora and I sat facing Price. On the table before him was a small cassette recorder. "With your permission, Mrs. Nelson, I'm going to tape this interview."

Nora drew back a bit at the sight of the machine. I squeezed her hand. "Don't worry. It's just routine. Try to ignore it."

Price switched on the recorder, gave the date and the time, and said that he, Nora Nelson, her attorney Fred West, and Police Matron Edith Foote were present. "Mrs. Nelson, please state where you were and what you did between the hours of five forty-five and the time the police were notified of your husband's death at nine eighteen P.M. on Tuesday, July nineteenth."

Nora shifted uncomfortably and looked at me. I nodded. In a

subdued voice she repeated essentially what she had told Janice and me. When she finished, Lieutenant Price said, "Now, after Mrs. West drove you to the mall, she went to Jenny Craig's and you went shopping. Did you buy anything?"

"No. A woman can spend a lot of time shopping and not buy a thing."

A whimsical smile played about the lieutenant's lips. "You were out of Mrs. West's sight for over an hour. Did you by any chance leave the mall, return home, and then go back to the mall and meet Mrs. West at the designated time?"

"Of course not." She was clearly indignant. "Why would I do that? How could I?"

"You could have taken Mrs. West's car."

"I don't drive."

"There's a bus route that runs along Chapman Avenue. A person could catch a bus at the mall at five past six, get off at the stop three blocks from your house at approximately six nineteen, then twenty minutes later catch a bus going in the opposite direction and be back at the mall just before seven o'clock."

"Are you implying I murdered Gordon?"

"I'm simply stating that you could have left the mall, gone

home, and returned to the mall within that time period."

"Well, I didn't! I did not kill Gordon! I found him dead when I got home."

"That may be, Mrs. Nelson, but you took a great deal of time notifying your neighbors. You're not telling the whole truth about what you did during the time between when you returned home with Mrs. West and when you notified her of finding the body." He took a small leather-bound notebook from a coat pocket and studied it briefly. "I think you should know that we talked to residents along your street and found three witnesses who say they saw you leave your house at approximately eight thirty and walk toward that little shopping center on Chapman Avenue carrying a plastic grocery bag. You were observed returning later empty-handed. What was in that bag, Mrs. Nelson?" There was a canary-whoswallowed-the-cat smile on his plump face as he waited for her reply. She remained silent. Lieutenant Price's manner of questioning changed. His voice was now designed to shock and intimidate. "Was it this gun?" He reached into another pocket and took out a revolver, which he dangled in front of her eyes. Nora gasped and slumped back in her chair.

"We've been very busy, Mrs.

Nelson. This weapon was found in a dumpster behind the liquor store at that strip mall, along with a bloodstained dress. We found no fingerprints on the gun, but there were several on the bag. I'm certain some of them will match yours. We checked the serial number and discovered that the gun belonged to Mr. Nelson and was purchased by him at Turner's Sporting Goods on January fourth of last year. It's a five-shot Rossi .38 special. One shot has been fired from it recently. Ballistics removed the spent cartridge and the four remaining live ones, then test-fired the gun. The bullet that killed your husband was fired from this revolver."

Nora's face went cold. She fell forward onto the table, her head resting on her forearms, her body wracked with sobs. At a motion from Price, Mrs. Foote came to the table and put her hands gently on Nora's shaking shoulders. I reached over and switched off the recording machine. "That was rather cruel," I said.

"Maybe, West," Price countered, "but if I can shock a suspect into a confession, I can save the taxpayers the cost of a trial and myself a great deal of work." He spoke to the matron. "Mrs. Foote, please help Mrs. Nelson to the matrons' lounge.

When she's sufficiently recovered, tell Sergeant Stuart to book her on suspicion of murder."

Mrs. Foote helped Nora to her feet and escorted her out of the room.

"Look here, Price. You know Nelson was killed a little after six twenty. She was three miles away at that time. You know he wasn't killed later and the clock changed. My house is next door to the Nelsons'. Our dens are opposite each other. I was in my office, less than fifteen feet from Nelson's den, from six forty until after nine. A .38 cartridge shouts bloody murder when fired. I would have easily heard the shot if he'd been killed later. And he couldn't have been killed before my wife took Mrs. Nelson to the mall or she would have heard the shot."

"You're right, counselor," Price admitted. "Nelson was plugged sometime between six twenty and six thirty-five and died instantly. Two of your neighbors heard the shot, but they disagree as to the exact time. The older gentleman lives on the other side of the Nelson house and the younger one directly behind. The guy next door says he thinks it was several minutes before six thirty. The one who lives behind is positive it was after six thirty. Now when you consider the coroner's

estimate of the time of death and the testimony of the witnesses, I believe that grandfather clock, which could have been running a bit slow, tells us the time."

"Those witnesses would be Gus Apfelbaum and Wallace Spurlock. I'm not surprised they disagree about the time. Those two can't agree on anything. They don't get along with each other and didn't with Nelson, either. They're always involved in some stupid neighborhood squabble and have come very close to blows in the past. Maybe one of *them* put that slug through Nelson's neck. It doesn't take much nowadays for a person to slaughter his neighbor." I put as much conviction as I could muster into that statement, but I didn't think Price bought it.

"Those are the names. Both claim they thought it was a car or truck backfiring. Personally, I think they just didn't care to get involved. I think we have the perpetrator in custody, but just to please you, we'll check out those two guys. After Mrs. Nelson has calmed down sufficiently, I'll question her some more."

"I want to confer with her."

"Sure, counselor. No problem about that. Come back in a couple of hours."

\*

**“H**ow could they arrest Nora?” Janice was incredulous.

“She was at the mall when Gordon was killed.”

“Price thinks she came home by bus, shot Gordon, then caught the bus back to the mall in time to meet you. It’s possible; she could have done just that. She lied to us about what she did after she got home. She tried to dispose of the gun and a bloody dress.”

“She did what?”

“You heard me. That’s the reason she took so long to let us know Gordon was dead. She left the house to get rid of those items. The police found them in the trash behind Benny’s liquor store.”

“Well, Lieutenant Price is wrong. She must have a logical explanation. I tell you Nora never left the mall. And she couldn’t have killed Gordon when she got back. We would have heard the shot. What motive could she have?”

“You have to admit that they haven’t been getting on very well since Gordon lost his job. You know as well as I that they spent money like there was no tomorrow. I doubt there was very much in their bank account when he was laid off. Adjusting to living on unemployment insurance after getting a fat

monthly paycheck isn’t easy. When a person over fifty loses his job, it’s tragic. Trying to find another at that age isn’t easy. Prospects are dismal. I’m not surprised he took to drinking more than was good for him. And his being home all the time probably caused friction.”

“Fred West! How dare you think she’s guilty!”

I tried to placate her. “Of course I don’t. But what’s her motive concerning the gun?”

“She could be protecting someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.” She folded her arms and unfurled her defensive glare. “It’s your job to find out.”

I met Lieutenant Price in his office at eight that night. He was thoroughly convinced of Nora’s guilt. “Look, West, we know from neighbors that the Nelsons weren’t on the best of terms. They had frequent loud quarrels. You live right next door. Don’t tell me you never heard them?”

“Nora Nelson was not a battered wife. She loved her husband. What motive would she have for murdering him?”

“The root of all evil. You know he had a hundred thousand dollar double indemnity life insurance policy?”

“So what? My life’s insured for five hundred grand. I expect to

hand in my dinner pail long before Janice does, but I don't expect her to speed me along."

Price shrugged. A wicked twinkle appeared in his dark eyes. "No doubt Mr. Nelson was of the same opinion."

"May I see Mrs. Nelson now?"

"By all means." He had Nora brought into the same interrogation room we'd used before, then politely withdrew.

She sat down on the chair I pulled out, and I took a seat on the other side of the table so I could look straight at her. "How are you holding up?"

Her grim face showed evidence of her ordeal, but she managed a weak smile.

"Not too well. Can you get me out on bail?"

"Not right away. Maybe not at all, if you're arraigned on a murder charge."

"How can they prove I killed him?"

"You can't prove you never left the mall."

"I don't have to." Her small fist hit the table. "They have to prove I did. And they can never do that because I didn't."

"Won't you tell me why you tried to dispose of the gun? How did you get blood on your dress?"

She looked at the window in the closed door. Matron Foote could be seen standing just outside. "I don't need to answer that. I didn't fire that gun, and

they can't prove I did. They did a test on my hands. It was negative."

"They'll contend you wore gloves or washed your hands very thoroughly."

"Let them! I never fired that gun! I never shot Gordon!"

"I'm sure you didn't, Nora, but why won't you tell me why you tossed the gun into that dumpster?" I got the obvious answer.

"I wanted to be rid of it."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons."

"Janice thinks you're protecting someone. Are you?"

She didn't answer.

"Nora, I'm your lawyer. How can I get you out of this mess unless you tell me the truth?"

"Tell Jan I appreciate her offer to take care of my house. I think I'll go now." She stood up, walked to the door, and knocked. Mrs. Foote opened the door.

As the matron was leading her away, I called out, "I'll talk to you again tomorrow."

When I got home, I found Janice conversing with a man in the living room. She introduced him as Mr. J. Melvin Paar from the company that insured Gordon Nelson. Janice explained that he had called to see me about five minutes ago.

Mr. Paar stood and extended

his hand. He was an inch shorter than my five eleven and about five years older than my thirty-six. His build was stocky, his face tanned and craggy, his hair cropped almost as short as a Marine recruit's. Although his handshake was firm, I detected an iciness in his steel-gray eyes that made me uneasy.

Much to Janice's disgust, I invited him into my office, which was off-limits to her when I had clients. She went off sulkily to the kitchen. I escorted Paar down the hall, offered him the comfortable chair I reserve for clients, and sat down behind my desk. "What can I do for you, Mr. Paar?"

"It's what I can do for you that brought me here." His voice was all business. I hoped he wasn't going to try to sell me any insurance.

"Let's see, shall we?"

"I'm an investigator for the Coast Fidelity Insurance Company, among others. It's my job to determine whether a claim is valid and should be paid or whether it's fraudulent. I'm very good at detecting fraud."

The smirk on his face annoyed me no end, but I didn't let it show.

"What has that to do with me?"

"It concerns your client, Mrs. Nora Nelson. Your charming wife was discussing the murder

with me when you arrived. I already knew that Mrs. Nelson was being held. Her motive, maybe: to collect his insurance. Coast Fidelity insured Mr. Nelson, who took out the policy a year and a half ago just after they bought the house next door."

"I don't believe she's filed a claim yet."

"It's a little soon, but she will. I've been an investigator for a long time, and I have many reliable sources who are willing to leak information to me if I grease their palms sufficiently. Unfortunately, that is a necessity in my business, you understand. The district attorney, I'm told, believes he can win a conviction and is prepared to file formal charges."

"Mrs. Nelson has a strong alibi."

"I believe 'unprovable' would be a better adjective. You may not be aware that the police are already questioning drivers and passengers who regularly ride the Chapman Avenue bus between six and seven P.M. They hope to find someone who saw Mrs. Nelson the night of Mr. Nelson's death. With several policemen showing pictures of Mrs. Nelson to hundreds of people, you can be almost certain they'll come up with at least one person, perhaps more, who will swear that they saw her on the



bus at that time. Then the D.A. can show means, motive, and opportunity."

He was probably right. Since Nora didn't drive, she had ridden that bus on many occasions. The power of suggestion is extremely persuasive. "How do you propose I counter that?"

"You could try to find some salesperson at the mall who remembers seeing her. Most stores are aggressively fighting shoplifting and eye customers with distrust. She might also have been videotaped by security cameras. I don't think those chances are very good."

I found myself agreeing with him. Nevertheless, I would probably give it a try.

"As you're aware," he went on, "the most serious evidence against Mrs. Nelson is that she attempted to dispose of her husband's handgun. The police believe they have the killer and aren't likely to look for anyone else."

Right again, I thought, wondering what he was getting at. He didn't keep me waiting long.

"I think I know why Mrs. Nelson continues to remain silent about the gun," he said. "This is the way I see it: Mrs. Nelson returns home from her trip to the mall. She goes to the den and finds her husband dead, the gun in his hand near the wound on the bloody floor. She realizes at

once that he's killed himself. She's shocked, but not so shocked that she fails to realize she won't collect on his life insurance policy, which is void if suicide occurs within two years of the date of issuance. She's a practical woman. She picks up the gun, musses up the room a bit, takes his watch and wallet to make it look like the work of a burglar, and throws away the weapon. If there's a note, she destroys it. She turns the suicide into a murder, never believing she'll be accused of the crime. How does that strike you?"

For a moment it struck me dumb. I recovered quickly. "It's an interesting supposition. Why are you so sure Nelson killed himself?"

He tapped his nose with his right forefinger. "This has smelled out more fraud than you can imagine. And this," he tapped his forehead, "contains information even you don't have. My sources at headquarters are extremely reliable. And the police and I interpret the information differently. If you check the coroner's report, of which I have a copy, you'll see that there was some powder residue on Mr. Nelson's right hand. The police contend he got the powder marks when he raised his arm in a defensive gesture as he was about to be

shot. I believe they're more consistent with suicide, a possibility the police won't even consider. They're convinced they've arrested the murderer."

"He wouldn't have shot himself in the neck."

Paar shrugged. "Why not? He was desperate. Probably gripping the gun tightly. It could have gone off as he was raising it to his temple."

"I suppose that's always a possibility."

"You can bet on it. My theory is perfectly plausible. The D.A. will drop the murder charge in a flash if you can persuade Mrs. Nelson to admit trying to make her husband's suicide look like murder to be able to collect his insurance. She won't get the money if she's convicted, and there's a good chance of that. If she admits her scheme, she at least won't spend a long time in prison."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I could say 'justice,' you know, but my main concern is saving my client two hundred thousand dollars."

"And getting a generous bonus."

"That too," he admitted. He stood up and handed me a card. "Let me know how things work out."

I saw him to the door. I didn't particularly care for Mr. Paar, but the more I thought about his

theory, the better I liked it—except the part about Nora's not receiving the insurance money. If the Nelsons' finances were as bad as I thought they must be, she would desperately need it. I went back to my office and sat down at my desk. I thought it was odd that Janice didn't come rushing in full of questions. Slowly I realized the imp must have sneaked into the bedroom across the hall and listened to the entire conversation.

**I** wanted to test Paar's theory, so I exaggerated considerably when I conferred with Nora the next morning. I not only exaggerated, I outright lied. I attempted to soften her up by saying the case against her was very strong, since the police had found two witnesses who claimed to have seen her on the bus, and the D.A. was certain to get a conviction. Of course she denied being on the bus. I told her that didn't make a particle of difference because the jury would believe the witnesses, especially in view of the fact that she had tried to dispose of vital evidence. I explained that she was in a catch-22 situation: if she were convicted, she couldn't collect the insurance, and if she were acquitted, the money would have been eaten up by legal fees. (I didn't tell her I had no intention

of charging for my services.) She remained obdurate. Then I hit her with Paar's theory. Slowly her defenses crumbled. She admitted that when she returned home and found Gordon had killed himself, it took her only a few minutes to recover from the shock. As Paar had surmised, she remembered the suicide clause. So she removed the gun and Gordon's watch and wallet—getting blood on her dress in the process—to make it look like a burglar had killed him. I was shocked when she admitted she had hidden Gordon's watch and wallet in my own guest room.

"I wasn't surprised that Gordon killed himself. He was very depressed. He had sent out dozens of resumes but didn't receive any job offers." Her lips were trembling and her eyes moist. "I need that insurance money for mortgage payments and living expenses. I've never worked and have no job skills. I don't want to lose the house. What am I going to do?" She began to cry. I gave her a handkerchief. She wiped her eyes.

"The first thing you're going to do is tell Lieutenant Price the truth. He'll contact the D.A.'s office, and I'm sure they'll drop the murder charge. They may want to file for tampering with evidence and attempted fraud, but I doubt it. The important

thing is that you'll be released. Are you ready to talk to Lieutenant Price?"

"Yes, I'll tell him everything he wants to know. Do you think he'll believe me?"

"Lieutenant Price is an overworked cop. He's going to be overjoyed that he can settle this case so quickly."

I used the wall phone to summon Price, and Nora made her confession. Price wasn't just overjoyed; if Nora hadn't been present, I'm sure he would have clicked his heels in the air.

"You understand, Mrs. Nelson, that the district attorney will still have to consider your statement. He may or may not decide to arraign you; however, in view of your revised statement I believe the decision will be favorable. I'm sorry that in the meantime you'll have to remain in custody. The matron here will take you back to your cell." A saintly smile erupted on his plump face. "But don't worry. I don't believe it will be for long."

After Nora had been taken away, Price fixed me with his devilish grin. "You know, counselor, the D.A. *was* ready to haul her up before a judge. I'm sure glad her confession clears up the matter so nicely."

"Does it? It leaves Mrs. Nelson in dire financial straits."

"That is one of the unfortu-

nate consequences of a husband's death."

"I know you're overworked and are tickled pink to have the case cleared up, but I'm not satisfied."

"You're not satisfied! What a pity!"

"Look, Price, I've known you to go out on a limb when you have a gut feeling about a case. Well, I've got one."

"Oh, you have, have you? Why don't you just tell papa?"

His mocking tone annoyed me, but I needed a favor. "It's something I saw or heard—or both. Could I see that video you made?"

Price raised his arms in a gesture of futility. "I've got more cases than my cat has fleas! But what the hell. It's a short tape, and you've saved me time. Let's go to my office."

As he slid the cassette into the machine, Price explained with pride, "I do this on my own. It preserves all the details much more vividly than the photos and diagrams made by forensics. I'm trying to talk the chief into making it SOP for all crimes."

After viewing the entire tape, which lasted slightly over two minutes, I asked Price to run it back and freeze on the long shot of Nelson's body. He was lying face down, his left arm out at an odd angle, the right one extend-

ed below his waist. "Do you see an inconsistency there?"

"Where?"

"The right hand. It should be closer to his head."

"Not necessarily. Remember he would have fallen after shooting himself. And don't forget, Mrs. Nelson disturbed the body when she was setting up her murder."

"Yeah, that's probably when it happened." But something was playing hide and seek with my memory. "Those books on the floor." I pointed out a few large books lying about three feet above Nelson's right shoulder. "I don't remember seeing them when I peeked into the room."

"The camera doesn't lie. As far as I know they're still there. Forensics checked them out even though they didn't seem pertinent to the murder. There were powder marks on them, of course. No prints. The deeply grained cloth bindings wouldn't hold any. What could they possibly have to do with a suicide made to look like murder? They could have been there for weeks."

"Gordon Nelson never had more than one book off the shelves at a time."

"You think they have any special significance?"

"Possibly. Could I take a look at the cartridges that were removed from Nelson's gun?"

Price rolled his eyes towards the ceiling and spread his hands, then left the room without uttering a sound. Three minutes later he returned, holding up a small plastic storage bag that contained an empty casing and four live cartridges. "Don't open. Don't touch. Just look."

"Have these cartridges been examined?"

"What for? Ballistics ejected them from the chambers into this bag so a test bullet could be fired. They can always be examined if the need arises."

Peering through the plastic, I took a long careful look at the contents. What I saw struck me as unusual. I handed the bag back to Price. "Take good care of these little guys."

"We always do."

"You said you're working on several other cases. All homicides?"

"What else? Three drive-by's, two during robberies, a fatal beating, a stabbing, and a hit-and-run."

"Hmmm. Could I have the details on the hit-and-run?"

"Not much on that. Happened close to your neighborhood over a week ago, I think. A couple of pedestrians saw it. They say it was a blue hatchback, probably a Plymouth Horizon. All those little hatchbacks look alike. One witness saw the license tag but could remember only the first

two letters and the last two numbers. It's a low priority case, but we're working on it."

"Thanks for showing me the tape."

"Gut feeling all gone?"

"Not yet. I won't say anything more now. I don't want to feel like a fool in case I'm wrong. I'll give you a call if I come up with anything."

"Do that."

Before I took Nora Nelson to her first interview with Lieutenant Price, she had given a set of her keys to Janice. When I returned that noon, I found Janice in the Nelsons' den contemplating the chalk outline forensics had drawn on the hardwood floor.

"Terrible," she shuddered. "I'm glad you had sense enough to keep me from seeing the body the other night."

"I always look after your best interests, my sweet. That's the exact position it was in when Lieutenant Price made his videotape. But I don't think Nora found Gordon in that position. I believe his hand was closer to his neck." I realized something was missing. "Where are the books, hon? The police didn't take them."

"After you called to say this room was no longer under seal, I straightened it up. They're on the shelf over there where they

belong, with the rest of the encyclopedia set. But it's strange, you know. The first three volumes of that set are missing. I've looked everywhere and can't find them. What were encyclopedias doing on the floor anyway? Gordon was always extremely careful with his books."

"I have an idea about that." I began opening desk drawers.

"What are you looking for?"

"Nora told me Gordon kept the gun in this desk."

"I'm sure the police searched that desk thoroughly. Don't go messing it up. There aren't any bullets there, if that's what you're looking for."

I stopped my search. "Hon, I've got to go talk to Gus Apfelbaum and Wallace Spurlock. They both heard the shot but don't agree about the time."

"If Gus said the sky was blue, Wally would say red."

"Well, while I go next door to talk to Gus and then over to see Wally, how about looking for a box of .38 caliber cartridges? Start in the master bedroom."

"What'll I get if I find one?" She smiled seductively.

"The ecstasy of knowing you helped your loving husband."

She stuck out her tongue.

I found Gus Apfelbaum in his back yard trimming some bushes. "Hello, Mr. Apfelbaum." Although everyone referred to him

as Gus, no one called August Apfelbaum "Gus" to his face. A German of the old school, he always insisted on using proper titles. "Working hard as usual, I see."

"Oh yes, Mr. West. Hard work, it never hurts nobody." Gus, although over seventy, was still as strong as a horse and spent several hours each day keeping his property in tip-top condition, making it the showplace of the neighborhood. He had carried on a running battle with Nelson, who mowed and edged only when the spirit moved him, which wasn't very often. Gus couldn't understand why I never complained about the shabby way Nelson kept his yard. I never had time to work on my own, but once a week had a gardener come in to keep it in a condition that apparently satisfied Mr. Apfelbaum.

After a few casual remarks, I got down to the business at hand. "I understand that you heard the shot that apparently killed Gordon Nelson."

Gus laid down his shears, put some clippings into a plastic trash container, and then gave me his full attention. "Mrs. Nelson has been arrested for the murder, yes? Such a nice lady. I believe she couldn't have done it. Unless of course Mr. Nelson treated the inside of his house as badly as the outside. That

would be a good reason to do him in. Yes, Mr. West, I told the policeman I heard the shot. It was about five minutes before half-past six."

"You're certain of the time? Wallace Spurlock says it was after six thirty."

Gus threw his arms into the air. "That no good troublemaker! He can get nothing right. Such a dummkopf! No, I tell you it was before six thirty. Every weeknight I must shut up the house at twenty past six. Then I get into my car and drive to fetch my wife from her work. It does not please her if I come late. So that night I am getting into my car a few minutes after six twenty when I hear the noise. Perhaps it is a shot, perhaps a backfire. I have no time to investigate. I must fetch my wife promptly."

"Then you looked at a clock just before you left."

"Yes. I have the alarm set for quarter after six so I do not arrive late."

"Did you happen to see anyone near the Nelson house as you were leaving?"

"No. I did see Mrs. Nelson arrive home later. Then she left the house on foot about halfway to nine and returned shortly before nine."

"Was she carrying a plastic grocery bag?"

"When she left, yes. When she

returned, no. I told that already to the policeman."

"You were looking out your window?"

He took no offense at my remark. "I was weeding the flowerbeds along the front of the house. During these hot summer days there is light for that until after nine, and I find it much cooler."

"You saw no one around Nelson's house earlier?"

"Not that day, but the day previous. I came out to fetch my mail. There was a man in uniform near Mr. Nelson's garage."

"Military?"

"No. Ace Exterminator Company. The name was printed on his shirtback."

"Can you describe him?"

"I saw only his back. He was taller than you. More stocky. He was wearing a cap, so I cannot tell what color hair he has or if he even has any."

"Thank you, Mr. Apfelbaum. Give my regards to Mrs. Apfelbaum."

I walked around the corner to the next street and rang the doorbell of the house directly behind Nora Nelson's. Wallace Spurlock invited me in. He seemed to know what I was there for. "Take a seat, Fred." He pointed to a somewhat worn couch and plopped himself into the recliner he had obviously just vacated. A can of beer and



a bowl of pretzels were on the small table next to him. He looked at me with an embarrassed smile: "Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Place is a mess while the wife's staying with Eunice. I'm going to be a grandfather in a couple of weeks."

"Congratulations, Wally. Your daughter's doing fine?"

"She's in great shape. Expecting twins." He laughed at his little joke. "Lives in Indiana, so naturally Marge is staying a couple of months. Unfortunately I've used all my vacation time, so I can't visit for a while." He grasped the can and emptied it with a satisfied smack. "Well, I think I know why you're here. I'll tell you what I told the cops. The night Nelson was killed I heard what I thought was a motor backfiring over on your street. Probably was the shot that killed Nelson, but I didn't know that then. Even if I'd known for certain, I don't think I'd've called 911. Not for that bastard. He or that kraut Apple-tree poisoned my dog Prince. Threw some doctored meat over the fence."

"Why would they want to kill your dog?"

"They complained about Prince's barking all the time. But they were full of crap. Sure Prince barked some but only

when he had a good reason. The Animal Control people were out several times, day and night, and Prince never barked once while they were here. They told Nelson and that old crab Apple-tree there was nothing they could do about him. So one of those s.o.b.'s—I'll bet it was Nelson—poisoned him. Shooting's too good for a dog poisoner."

"It could have been someone else."

"Naw. They were the only ones who complained."

"What I'm interested in is the time you heard the shot. Gus Apfelbaum says it was about twenty-five after six."

"He's full of crap. That kraut doesn't know you-know-what from peanut butter. The shot was several minutes after six thirty."

"How can you be so sure? Did you look at your watch?"

"Didn't have to. I was watching the Channel 2 news. It ends at six thirty. After it finished, I went out to the back yard to get the trashcans ready for the next day's pickup. I was there for a couple of minutes before I heard the shot."

I got up. Spurlock remained seated. I extended my hand. "Thanks, Wally. What you told me is important."

When I got back to my house, I put the question to Janice. "Apfelbaum pinpoints the shot

at a little after six twenty. Spurlock says it was several minutes after six thirty. What's the answer?"

Janice can be a pretty sharp thinker. "Simple. One of them is mistaken or lying."

"Suppose they are both telling the truth and each is right about the time?"

"But how can that be? Gordon's gun holds only five bullets, and you told me that only one of them had been fired. Wait a minute. There could have been two guns. There's your answer, Fred." Her kissable lips parted, her eyebrows rose, her creamy smooth forehead became a series of parallel creases. "But he couldn't have killed himself and then fired a second gun."

"Exactly. He couldn't, and he didn't. I'm convinced he was murdered and the killer fired both shots."

"Not Nora?"

"Don't be silly. When Nora discovered the body, she was convinced Gordon had killed himself. She only made it look like murder in order to collect the insurance money."

"But when you called, you said the police were satisfied Gordon killed himself."

"They are. I'm not. Gordon was murdered. You can bet your lace-trimmed panties on that. The person who killed him arranged it to look like suicide.

Then Nora came along and spoiled his plan."

"But why did he shoot two guns?"

"He didn't."

"Hold on, Fred, you're losing me."

I grinned at her bewilderment. "I'll explain it all later. Right now there are still a few things I have to clear up. Got the key to Nelson's garage?"

"It's on the ring Nora gave me."

"Then come along, my sweet. I want to see their car."

"His, you mean. You know Nora doesn't drive."

"Don't split hairs, hon."

Janice removed the padlock, and I swung the double door upward. Gordon Nelson's '89 Plymouth Horizon loomed up as bright and spotless as if it were sitting on a used car lot. I circled it. There was a small dent in the front bumper, the glass in the right headlight was cracked, and the hood above it was slightly crumpled. That blue hatchback had never embraced a steel or concrete lamp-post head-on. "Is the car key on the ring?"

"See for yourself." She tossed the bunch.

The ignition key was easy to spot. I slid into the car and started the engine, then backed cautiously out of the garage and into the street. I did a trial run

around the block, keeping just within the speed limit. Janice was open-mouthed with amazement when I swung smartly into the driveway and eased the car into the garage.

"Gordon lied to Nora!" she said. "There's nothing wrong with his car."

"Exactly. He did have an accident, but what he hit wasn't a lamppost. He locked the car in the garage, knowing Nora would never bother looking at it and to keep it out of sight."

"Why would he do such a thing?"

"That's exactly what I intend to find out." I locked the garage, and we went back to my office.

Janice picked up a small box from the desk and handed it to me. "This was on the top closet shelf in Nora's bedroom."

"Just what I was hoping you'd find. You'll get your reward later." I opened one end and slid out the plastic tray that held the cartridges. It had originally held fifty .38 caliber bullets. Five spaces were empty. Just the number to fill the cylinder in Gordon's revolver. On the bottom of each brass cartridge case was the imprint "Winchester." I closed the box and put it back on the desk, then spent half an hour or so talking to people in various insurance offices. Janice sat in her chair like a sweet little kitten, not saying a word but

taking in the nuances of every conversation. The last call I made was to Lieutenant Price, telling him I wanted to report a murder.

"You've found another body? You're getting to be a regular Perry Mason."

"Not another body, Price. The one that's already in the morgue. Gordon Nelson's. It wasn't suicide. Listen, if you take a few minutes and do what I suggest, I'll be able to prove it was murder and hand you the killer on a platinum platter. Be sure to keep everything under wraps."

He did and I did.

**T**he next evening Nora Nelson was sitting in a comfortable chair in our living room, I was on the couch, and Janice was snuggled next to me. Nora had been completely exonerated because I had proved her husband had been murdered. She was grateful to learn that she would be collecting the insurance money in the not too distant future.

"How did you do it?" she wanted to know.

Here, briefly, are the facts.

After having given Lieutenant Price a couple of suggestions, I hung up the phone, virtually certain what he would discover when he had the cartridges in the little plastic envelope examined. I took out the card that

J. Melvin Paar, the insurance investigator, had given me and called his number. His phone rang twice; then I heard his voice. "Paar here."

"Fred West, Mr. Paar. I used that suicide theory of yours to get Mrs. Nelson to admit she had found her husband dead by his own hand. There have been some startling developments which I'm certain your sources have been unable to tell you about. Could you possibly see me tonight, say at eight?"

There was a pause, during which I heard the shuffling of papers. "Okay, I can make it."

Paar was punctual, ringing my doorbell at two minutes after the designated hour. I showed him into the living room and offered him a seat on the couch. (I had convinced Janice that it would be to her advantage to wait in my office.) I remained standing.

He looked up. "Can we get to the point, West. I broke an appointment to be here."

"Sure. Here it is. You must have been shocked when the police announced that Mrs. Nelson was being held for her husband's murder."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you killed Nelson yourself and set it up to look like suicide. When Mrs. Nelson ruined your plan, you came to me with your 'theory,' hoping

that I would be able to convince her to admit her husband had killed himself. In your mind it had to be labeled suicide for two reasons. First, you weren't convinced Mrs. Nelson would be convicted of murder and feared the police would start searching for the real killer—you. You thought you had cleaned up everything after you killed him but realized it was possible you'd left some incriminating evidence in the den. Fingerprints would be a good bet. Your secondary reason was to save the insurance company two hundred thousand dollars and earn that fat bonus."

"You ought to be writing fairy tales, West," he said, but he wasn't smiling. "Why would I want to kill Nelson? I didn't even know the guy."

"That had me puzzled for a while. You told me you work for several insurance companies. One of them insured a man who was killed by a car only a few blocks from here. I'll have to admit one thing, Paar: you're a crackerjack investigator. I can only imagine how you discovered that Nelson was the driver of the hit-and-run car. Having discovered it, you tried to shake him down. He resisted, and you killed him. After which you set up his 'suicide.' You took half a dozen books down from a shelf and set them on the floor, put

the gun in Nelson's hand, and fired a shot into the books so his hand would have the necessary powder residue. The bullet passed through two of the books and lodged in the third. So there would be no evidence that two shots had been fired from Nelson's gun, you removed one cartridge from your own .38 and substituted it for one of the spent shells in Nelson's revolver. You cleaned up any evidence of your struggle with Nelson and took away the damaged books."

"You can't prove that."

"Of course I can. You didn't know the cartridges in Nelson's gun were a different brand from the ones in yours. When the police removed the shells from Nelson's gun, there were four live cartridges and one spent one. The cartridge cases of the spent shell and three of the live ones were manufactured by Winchester. The fifth one was made by Federal. Since all of Nelson's cartridges were Winchester, someone else had to have put the Federal cartridge in his revolver. I'm sure, unless you were extremely careful, your fingerprints will be on the Federal cartridge."

"Well," Paar said, "I've heard enough of this nonsense. You wasted your time luring me over here." He rose slowly. "You should have left it at suicide,

West. Now I'm afraid there's going to be another one." As if by magic a gun appeared in his right hand.

"I was hoping you'd do that. That revolver will provide the final piece of evidence to convict you." I turned my head toward the kitchen door. "Time to come out, lieutenant!"

"*Police! Freeze!*" Price's voice thundered. "*Drop the gun!*"

Sergeant Stuart, with drawn pistol, followed Price into the room.

Paar lowered his arm, put the gun on the floor, and slumped back onto the couch.

I picked up the revolver. "Smith & Wesson .38 special. Holds six shots," I said, flipping open the cylinder. "One chamber empty. Cartridge cases manufactured by Federal."

Sergeant Stuart pulled Paar to his feet and cuffed him while Lieutenant Price read him his rights.

Paar began speaking rapidly. "Listen! It was self-defense—an accident. Nelson was drunk. When I suggested that if he came up with a reasonable amount of cash, I wouldn't report him to the police for running down that man, he went crazy. Pulled a gun out of his desk and threatened to blow my head off. I grabbed for the gun, and we struggled. There was a shot, and the slug went right

through his neck. The rest happened just about the way you figured, West. But it was self-defense. If that fool hadn't pulled out his gun, he'd still be alive."

"I believe you, Paar," I said, showing no sympathy. "If you had known that Nelson had no money to pay off a blackmailer, you would never have gone to his house. You would have been content to turn him in for the thousand dollar reward offered by the victim's family. Too bad you thought you could get more out of Mr. Nelson."

Price reached out for Paar's revolver. "I'll take that, West. You know, you make a pretty good detective."

I smiled but tried to appear modest.

"But don't look so smug. The lab couldn't lift any identifiable prints from that Federal cartridge."

"Well, as you know from long experience, lieutenant, you can't be right all the time." I directed my attention to the prisoner. "Paar, you made a mistake when you left those books on the floor. They and that Federal cartridge started me thinking that two shots must have been fired. The fact that two reliable witnesses heard shots at different times confirmed it."

"Yeah, I took away the damaged books but didn't take time

to put the others back on the shelf."

"Okay, Paar, time for your joyride," Price said.

At the door, Paar asked, "Mr. West, would you represent me?"

I had to exercise the utmost self-control to keep from falling down laughing. "Sorry, Paar, but I'm afraid there's a conflict of interest. I'll give you this advice, however. Get your attorney to do some plea-bargaining with the D.A. He might go for involuntary manslaughter."

"I was so positive Gordon had shot himself," Nora admitted. "That's why I threw away the gun. I needed the insurance money. I was pretty stupid to think I could get away with it."

"Don't feel too bad about it, Nora," Janice put in. "But isn't Fred wonderful for working it out so that you *will* collect the insurance." She gave me a big squeeze.

"He certainly is," Nora said. "But what I don't understand, Fred, is why you suspected murder after I said it was suicide."

"Something Mr. Paar said when he told me his suicide theory. He described Gordon's right hand as being near the bloody wound. In order to give that description, he had to have been in the room before Nora changed things. Lieutenant

Price's video clearly shows Gordon's hand at his side. When Paar told me his theory, he was describing the body as he had last seen it, having arranged it that way himself."

Janice punched the TV remote and brought up the Channel 2 eleven o'clock news. She had timed it perfectly. The news anchor was describing the arrest of J. Melvin Paar as the videotape showed Lieutenant Price and Sergeant Stuart leading Paar from our house to their car. The co-anchor, a goodlooking blonde, commented that Lieutenant Price had done a brilliant piece

of detective work. My name was not mentioned.

Janice was furious. She viciously jabbed the "off" button. "The nerve of them giving Lieutenant Price all the credit. If it weren't for Fred, Nora, you'd still be in jail." She appeared to be more upset with me than she was with the newscasters. "Fred, you aren't even the teeniest bit mad!"

I looked deep into her lovely blue eyes. "Not the most microscopic bit, my sweet. Haven't I always told you that a good deed, like virtue, is its own reward."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# AN ARROW O'ER THE HOUSE

Dorothy L. Sayers





“**T**he fact is, Miss Robbins,” said Mr. Humphrey Podd, “that we don’t go the right way about it. We are too meek, too humdrum. We write—that is, I write—a story that is a hair-raiser, a flesh-creeper, a bloodcurdler, calculated to make stony-eyed gorgons howl in their haunted slumbers. And what do we do with it?”

Miss Robbins, withdrawing from the typewriter the final sheet of *The Time Will Come!* by Humphrey Podd, fastened it to the rest of the chapter with a paper clip and gazed timidly at her employer.

“We send it to a publisher,” she hazarded.

“Yes,” repeated Mr. Podd bitterly, “we send it to a publisher. How? Tied up in brown paper with a covering note, begging to submit it for his consideration. Does he consider it? Does he even read it? No! He keeps it in a dusty basket for six months and then sends it back with hypocritical thanks and compliments.”

Miss Robbins glanced involuntarily towards a drawer in which, as she too well knew, lay entombed the stillborn corpses of *Murder Marriage*, *The Deadly Elephant*, and *The Needle of Nemesis*, battered with travel and melancholy with neglect. Tears came into her eyes, for though Heaven had denied her brains she was as devoted to her work as any typist can be and cherished, moreover, a secret and passionate attachment to Mr. Podd.

“Do you think a personal call—” she began.

“That’s no good,” said Mr. Podd. “The beasts are never in. Or if they are, they are always in conference with somebody of importance, ha ha! No. What we want to do is to take a leaf out of the advertiser’s book—create a demand—rouse expectation. The ‘Watch This Space’ stunt and all that sort of thing. We must plan a campaign.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Podd?”

“We must be up-to-date, dynamic, soul-shattering,” pursued the author. He swept back the lock of fair hair which was trained to tumble into his eyes at impressive moments and assumed the air of a Napoleon. “Whom shall we select as our objective? Not Sloop—he is too well fed. Nothing could make that swill-fatted carcass quiver. Nor Gribble and Tape because they are both dead and you cannot hope to stagger a boneheaded board of directors. Horace Pincock is vulnerable, but I would rather starve in a garret than become a Horace Pincock author.” (Not that there was any chance of Mr. Podd’s starving, for he had an ample allowance

from his widowed mother, but the expression sounded good.) "Nor Mutters and Stalk—I've met Algernon Mutters, and he reminded me of a lop-eared rabbit. John Paragon is out of the question—his own advertising is pitiable, and he wouldn't appreciate us. I think we will concentrate on Milton Ramp. For a publisher, he is intelligent and go-ahead, and my friends tell me he is highly strung. Go and get me a broad pen, a bottle of scarlet ink, and some of that revolting bright green paper you buy from the six-penny bazaar."

"Oh yes, Mr. Podd," breathed Miss Robbins.

The campaign against Mr. Milton Ramp opened that day with an emerald missive marked "Private and Confidential." Inside, the paper bore only the words **THE TIME WILL COME!** executed in scarlet letters an inch high. Miss Robbins posted this at the West Central Post Office.

"They must all be posted from different places," said Mr. Podd, "for fear of discovery."

The second message (posted in Shaftesbury Avenue) had no wording; it consisted merely of an immense scarlet arrow with a venomous-looking barb. The third (posted in Fleet Street) showed the arrow again, together with the mysterious caption: "Time has an arrow—see Eddington—its mark is ruin and desolation." The fourth drove home this ambiguous remark with a quotation from Mr. Podd's latest work: "Ruin may seem far distant, but—**THE TIME WILL COME!**" At this point the weekend intervened, and Mr. Podd rested on his oars. He spent Sunday morning in picking out choice bits from his novel. The story lent itself to this, being concerned with the activities of an indignant gentleman wrongfully condemned to penal servitude by the machinations of a company promoter, and devoting his remaining years to a long-drawn-out series of threats and revenges. On Sunday night Mr. Podd posted the next letter with his own hand. It was an excerpt from Chapter IV, where the hero, in a great scene, defies his oppressor and ran:

*Guilty as you are, you cannot escape forever. Truth shall prevail. **THE TIME WILL COME!***

On Monday he was assailed by the thought that Mr. Ramp might take the whole thing as a joke. This worried him. He made re-

searches into the life history of a more celebrated author, and wrote:

*You laugh now—but THE TIME WILL COME when you will hear me!—see Disraeli.*

This pleased him until the moment when he found Miss Robbins throwing a letter into the wastepaper basket.

"Only an advertising circular, Mr. Podd," explained Miss Robbins.

"Woman!" cried Mr. Podd, "you alarm me! How if the hippopotamus-skinned Ramp has protected himself with a bulwark of women like you? Perhaps he has never even seen our well-thought-out nerve-shatterers! Damnable thought. But stay! Did not that idea also occur to the injured Rupert Pentecost?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Podd. In Chapter XV. I'll look it up for you."

"A quotation to suit every situation," said Mr. Podd. "Ah! thank you, Miss Robbins. Yes. 'Remember the woman whose life you laid waste! If you persist in your obduracy, the warnings will go to your private address.' That will do nicely. Pass me the red ink. Post this in Hampstead on your way home, and find out where the unspeakable Ramp has his detested lair."

The task was not a hard one, for Mr. Ramp's lair was quite openly entered in the telephone directory, and the next letter was posted (from a pillar-box in Piccadilly) to that address:

*Nemesis sits on the ruined hearth. THE TIME WILL COME!*

This was embellished by a clock face in which arrow-shaped hands pointed to half-past eleven.

"We will move the time five minutes on every day," said Mr. Podd. "In another week's time the fellow ought to be twittering. We'll show him what advertising means. Talking about its paying to advertise, oughtn't we to make some suggestion about advance royalties? Five hundred would be mild for a book of this quality, but these fellows are all hardfisted misers. Let us say two hundred fifty pounds to start with."

"There's nothing about that in the book," said Miss Robbins.

"No, not in the book," agreed Mr. Podd, "because Jeremy Vanbrugh is supposed to be a sympathetic character—I didn't want to turn him into a blackmailer. The public can get fond of a mere mur-

derer and doesn't mind if the detective lets him off at the end, but a blackmailing murderer *must* be hanged. It's one of the rules."

"But," said Miss Robbins, "mightn't Mr. Ramp think we were blackmailers if we asked for money?"

"That's different," replied Mr. Podd rather irritably. "We are only asking for our due reward. He'll think so when he sees the book. Let's see: 'A first payment of two hundred fifty pounds'—no, hang it! that sounds like hire-purchase. Wait a minute. 'I only ask for two hundred fifty pounds—now—but *THE TIME WILL COME* when you will pay me more'—no—'pay up in full'—that's crisper. We'll push this round to both addresses."

He wrote the letters and dictated a chapter of a new book. "It will be wanted quickly when the first one gets going," he observed. "We shall hardly be able to turn them out fast enough. It will be a great strain, no doubt."

"Oh but you have so many wonderful ideas, Mr. Podd. And I don't mind working extra."

"Thank you, Miss Robbins," said Mr. Podd condescendingly. "You are a good girl. I don't know what I should do without you." He tossed back the Napoleon lock. "Have you got your notebook? Take down this. *The Corpse in the Sewer*. Chapter I. The Smell in the Scullery. 'Anne,' said Mrs. Fletcher to the cook, 'have you been throwing cabbage water down the sink?' 'No, ma'am,' replied the girl pertly, 'I should hope I know better than that—' That gives the right domestic touch for the opening, I think."

"Oh yes, Mr. Podd."

Mr. Podd was lunching with a literary friend named Gamble. He did not very much like Gamble, who was one of those people who are quite spoilt by a trifling success. Gamble's novel *Waste of Shame* had, for some reason, achieved a sort of flukey popularity, and the incense had gone to his head. He was frequently seen at publishers' parties, had made a witty speech before Royalty at a literary dinner, and now made a foolish pretense of possessing inside knowledge of everyone in the publishing world. One could not afford not to know Gamble, but he was very trying to his friends. Humphrey Podd looked forward to the day when he would be able to patronize Gamble in his turn.

"Look!" said Gamble, "there's Ramp just come in. That fellow's cracking up. Got the willies. You can see it in his face."

Mr. Podd gazed at the publisher—a thin, dark, fretted face and a pair of nervous hands that picked unceasingly at a roll of bread.

"Why?" asked Mr. Podd. "He's all right, isn't he? His stuff sells, doesn't it?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with the *business*," said Gamble. "You're all right there if you're thinking of placing anything with him. No—it's something quite different. Don't let this go any further, but I shouldn't be surprised if there was an explosion in that quarter before long."

"Explosion?" repeated Mr. Podd.

"Well, yes—but I oughtn't to say anything. I just happen to know, that's all. One gets to hear these things somehow."

Mr. Podd was annoyed. He would have liked to hear more, but he was determined not to encourage Gamble.

"Oh well," he said, "as long as the firm's all right, that's the main thing. Chap's private life is none of my business."

"Private—ah! there you are," said Gamble darkly. "From what I hear, it won't stay private very long. If some of the letters come into court—whew!"

"Letters?" asked Mr. Podd, suddenly interested.

"Hell!" said Gamble. "I oughtn't to have said anything about that. It was told me in confidence. Forget it, will you, old boy?"

"Oh, certainly," said Humphrey Podd, annoyed with himself and with Gamble.

"He's beginning to sit up and take notice," announced Mr. Podd to Miss Robbins. And he repeated Mr. Gamble's conversation.

"Oh, Mr. Podd!" exclaimed Miss Robbins. She fiddled nervously with her typewriter ribbon. "Mr. Podd!" she burst out uncontrollably, "you don't suppose he—I mean, you never know, do you? And he might be angry."

"He'll forget it once he sees the book," said Mr. Podd.

"Yes, but—just imagine! I mean, he might have really done something. Perhaps he's getting frightened—I mean—you'll think I'm awfully silly."

"Not at all, Miss Robbins," said Humphrey Podd.

"Well, I mean—suppose there's a dark secret in his past life—"

"That would be an idea," cried Mr. Podd excitedly. "Wait a minute—wait a minute! Miss Robbins, you've given me the plot for a new book. Here! take this down. Title: *A Bow at a Venture*. No, dash it! I've an idea that's been used before. I've got it: *An Arrow O'er the*

*House*. Quotation from *Hamlet*: 'That I have shot my arrow o'er the house and hurt my brother.' Plot begins. Somebody—call him Jones—writes threatening letters to—say, Robinson. Jones means it for a joke, but Robinson is frightened to death because, unknown to Jones, he really has—call it, murdered somebody. Make it a woman—female victims always go down well. Robinson commits suicide, and Jones is prosecuted for blackmail and murder. I'm not sure if frightening a man to death would be brought in murder, but I expect it would. Blackmail is a felony, and if you accidentally kill somebody while you're engaged in felony, the killing is murder, so it might come in that way. I say, this idea of mine is going to be good. Wash out *The Corpse in the Sewer*—I never thought a lot of that. We'll get going straight away on this one. Jones thinks he has covered his tracks, but the police—no, not the police—they're baffled, of course. The detective. Let's see; I think we'd better use Major Hawke again for this one. He's my best detective, and if readers get keen on him in *The Time Will Come!*, they'll want to hear about him again—Hawke gets on the scene of the letters. It's difficult because of course they've all been posted in different places, but—"

Miss Robbins, her pencil staggering over the paper as she struggled to follow Humphrey Podd's disjointed speech, gave a little gasp.

"Hawke traces the paper, of course—where purchased, and so on. And the ink. Oh yes—and we can have a thumbprint on one of the envelopes. Not Jones's—his *fiancée's*, I think, who has posted the letters for him. She—yes, she's a good character but hopelessly under the influence of Jones. We'll think that out. Better marry her off to somebody nicer in the end. Not Major Hawke—somebody else. We'll invent a decent chap for her. There'll be a good scene when she is frantically burning the evidence while the police hammer at the door. We must make her overlook something, of course, or Jones would never get detected—never mind, I can think that out later. Court scene—that'll be good—"

"Oh, Mr. Podd! But does poor Jones get hanged? I mean, it seems very hard lines on him when he only meant it for a joke."

"That's where the irony comes in," said Mr. Podd ruthlessly. "Still, I see what you mean. The public will want him saved. All right—we'll stack that. We'll make him a bad character—one of those men who trample over women's hearts and laugh at their sufferings. He gets away with all his real crimes and then—here's your irony—does himself in over this one harmless joke on a man

he quite likes. Make a note, 'Jones laughs once too often.' Must get a better name than Jones. Lester is a good name. Everybody calls him 'Laughing Lester.' Fair, curly hair—put that down—but his eyes are set a little too close together. I say, this is shaping splendidly."

"And about the letter to Mr. Ramp," suggested Miss Robbins with some hesitation when the main lines of *An Arrow O'er the House* had been successfully laid down. "Perhaps you'd rather I didn't post it?"

"Not post it?" said Mr. Podd, amazed. "Why, it's a beauty. 'THE TIME WILL COME'—and it is later than you think.' Post it, of course. Ramp's got to be roused."

Miss Robbins obediently posted the letter—with gloves on.

It was not till the arrow-headed hands on Mr. Podd's clock face had reached eleven forty-five and the message had taken the form "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" that it occurred to him to test the victim's reaction personally. The idea came to him at eleven forty-five precisely, in the middle of Piccadilly Circus. With a hoarse chuckle which caused a passing messenger boy to turn round and stare at him in amazement he plunged headlong down the subway and into a public callbox in the rotunda. Here he obtained the number of Mr. Ramp's office.

The female voice that answered said that Mr. Ramp was engaged and inquired the name of the caller. Mr. Podd was prepared for this and said that the matter was strictly private and very urgent. Further, that he would not feel justified in giving his name to anybody but Mr. Ramp. The girl seemed less surprised and less obdurate than Mr. Podd might have expected. She put him through. A sharp, worried voice said, "Yes? yes? yes? Who's that?"

Mr. Podd lowered his naturally rather high tones to an impressive croak.

"THE TIME WILL COME," he said. There was a pause.

"What did you say?" demanded the sharp voice irritably.

"THE TIME WILL COME," repeated Mr. Podd. Then, prompted by a sudden inspiration, he added, "*Shall we send the proofs to the public prosecutor?*"

There was another pause. Then the voice said, "I don't know what you are talking about. Who is it speaking, please?"

Mr. Podd laughed fiendishly and rang off.

"And why not?" said Mr. Podd to Miss Robbins. "People are always sending advance proofs to prime ministers and literary crit-

ics. The public prosecutor's opinion ought to be as good as anybody's. Make a note of it."

Two days passed. The daily missive now bore only the ominous word: "TOMORROW." Mr. Podd dictated three chapters of *An Arrow O'er the House* right off the reel and went out to tea with a friend, leaving Miss Robbins to pack up the top copy of *The Time Will Come!* and dispatch it, per post, to Mr. Milton Ramp.

It was a raw and foggy day. Cold, too—Miss Robbins stoked up the stove in Humphrey Podd's studio, for her fingers were numb with notetaking. As she stepped out into the square with the manuscript under her arm, she shivered and pulled her fur more closely about her neck.

On her way to the post office she had to pass the news vendor at the corner of the square. The scarlet lettering on the placards he held made a splash of brightness in the gloom and caught Miss Robbins' eye. With a sudden leap of the heart she read the words LONDON PUBLISHER SHOT.

The manuscript slipped from her grasp. She picked it up, fumbled hurriedly in her bag for a penny, and bought a copy of the *Evening Banner*. She opened it, standing by the square railings. A heavy splash of soot-laden water dripped from an overhanging tree upon the crown of her hat. At first she could not find what she was looking for. Eventually she discovered a few smudged lines in the Stop Press column.

*Mr. Milton Ramp, the well-known publisher, was found shot dead in his office today when his secretary returned from lunch. A discharged revolver lay on the floor beside him. Mr. Ramp is said to have been worried of late by domestic troubles, and by the receipt of anonymous letters. The police are making investigations.*

The manuscript under Miss Robbins' arm seemed to have grown to colossal size. She looked up and caught the eye of the news vendor. It was an unnaturally bright eye, like a hawk's. It made her think of the chapter in *Murder Marriage* where Major Hawke had disguised himself as a news vendor in order to watch a suspected house. She hurried back to the studio. As she bolted up the front steps, she glanced nervously back. Through the fog she made out a dim and bulky shape advancing along the other side of the square. It wore a helmet and a waterproof cape.



Humphrey Podd's studio flat was on the top floor. Miss Robbins took the three flights at a run, dashed to cover, and locked the door after her. Peeping out from behind the window curtain, she saw the policeman speaking to the news vendor.

Thank goodness, thought Miss Robbins, I hadn't posted the manuscript. She tore off the brown paper and gaspingly extracted the covering letter that bore Humphrey Podd's name and address. The top sheet of the manuscript followed it into the fire. Then she sat trembling. But not for long. There was the carbon copy. There were her shorthand notes. There was the story itself, which bore the unmistakable marks of Humphrey Podd's authorship. With a sick presentiment of disaster, Miss Robbins remembered that Major Hawke—that inspired detective—figured not only in *The Time Will Come!* but also in *Murder Marriage*, which had been submitted to Mr. Milton Ramp only three months ago. Mr. Podd had said that publishers never read his manuscripts—but could one count on that? Some secretary, some hired reader, might have glanced at it, and nobody who had ever encountered Major Hawke could possibly forget him and his eccentricities.

Miss Robbins looked out of the window again. The policeman was advancing with his stately tread along the near side of the square and glancing up at the windows. He approached the house. He stopped. With a terrified squeak Miss Robbins rushed to the roaring stove and crammed the manuscript in—top copy—carbon—notebook—pulling the chapters hurriedly apart to make the mass of paper burn faster. What else was there? The plot book—that must go, too. Her hand shook as she wrenched the pages out. And—oh, she had nearly forgotten the most damning evidence of all—the green paper. Mr. Podd had said that detectives could always trace the purchase of paper. She fed it desperately to the leaping flame, flinging the pen and the bottle of red ink after it for good measure and piling fresh coal and coke on top of it.

She was still bending, hot and flushed, over the stove when she heard footsteps coming up the stair. She dashed to the typewriter and began to pound nervously at the keys. A hand shook the door handle.

"Hell!" said the voice of Humphrey Podd. Then came the noise of a key entering the lock. "Damn the girl—she's still out."

Mr. Podd walked in.

"You're here!" he said, astonished. "What the devil are you doing with the door locked? Look here, here's a dashed nuisance! That ass

Ramp has gone and blown his brains out, if he ever had any, and all our advance publicity has been wasted. We'll have to start all over again."

"Oh, Mr. Podd!" cried Miss Robbins. "I'm so thankful you're here. When I saw the policeman, I was afraid he'd catch you, and I didn't know where you were, to warn you."

"No wonder Ramp looked white about the gills," pursued Mr. Podd, unheeding. "His wife's been carrying on with some man or other. Ramp got wind of it through some anonymous letters from a discharged servant, and there was a frightful bust-up last night and his wife's bolted. And now the fool's gone and shot himself. I got hold of that infuriating chap Gamble and wrung the whole thing out of him. He might have told me earlier, blast him! It's no good sending anything there now. I hope you didn't post that manuscript. If you did, we must get it back and try it on Sloop—what on earth's the matter with you, Miss Robbins?"

"Oh, Mr. Podd!" cried Miss Robbins. "We can't—we—I thought—oh, Mr. Podd, I've burnt the manuscripts!"

Police-constable E 999 withdrew his wistful gaze from the lighted area. Somebody in the basement was stewing tripe, and the smell came up comfortingly. He hoped there would be something equally good waiting for him at home. As he ambled along the pavement, he heard a crash and tinkle of glass, and a typewriter came hurtling out of an upper window, just missing his helmet.

"Hullo!" said P.C. E 999.

A loud shriek followed. Then a shrill female voice cried, "Help! help! murder!"

"Gor lumme!" said the constable. "They *would* go and start something just when I was getting away to my supper."

He climbed the steps and knocked thunderously upon the door.

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PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO DELL MAGAZINES.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**I**n **Shadow of Death** (Mysterious Press, \$19.95) by Noreen Gilpatrick, Seattle homicide cop Kate MacLean has her share of woes even before she gets to the body of a young schoolgirl murdered in the woods. Her partner Sam and his wife are working out their problems, and he has asked to be switched to a desk job. With Sam out of the running, it looks as if fellow detective Goddard will get the promotion to lieutenant. Kate and Goddard loathe one another, and he's pushing himself into this latest case. Then there's the victim, young Sarah Taft, an A student at a nearby Christian academy, and—it soon develops—the first victim in a series of brutal murders of church members. A complex plot, a fascinating portrait of a fictional church community, a large cast of credible and compelling characters, and a sympathetic heroine make this one impossible to put down.

Sally Gunning has created an engaging hero in Peter Bartholomew, entrepreneur and founder of Factotum, a small business executing odd jobs on Nashtoba, an island resembling Nantucket. In **Still Water** (Pocket, \$5.50), as usual, Peter and his partner are up to their necks in commissions, from reading the morning paper to a senior citizen, to cleaning up a huge old house after its longtime owner has died. Our hero also finds himself getting involved again with his ex-wife Connie. Then a wealthy new island resident anxiously appeals to Factotum: his young bride has narrowly escaped several "accidents" in their new home, and the groom suspects foul play. It's not an assignment that appeals to Peter (in spite of his prior success as an amateur sleuth) until he meets Claire and finds himself compelled to protect her. When another accident kills someone, Peter's on the spot to nail more than the barn roof shingles.

Lively reading and a surprise ending are all part of the fun.

Joining Susan Wittig Albert's heroine China Bayles in her latest adventure, **Rosemary Remembered**, is a bit like taking a vacation. In Pecan Springs, Texas, we get a warm clime, a few old and comfortable friends, and an easygoing way of life, not to mention a peek into China and McQuaid's new blended family life. (She's moved out of the digs over her herb shop in town and in with McQuaid and his son Brian.) The contrast is what makes the murder of their accountant so ghastly. Rosemary Robbins was a workaholic, perhaps even a bit driven, and certainly not very accessible on a personal level to the more laid-back China. But the China who left a top law practice in California would have had much in common with Rosemary, and the Pecan Springs China can't help but investigate her death. Meanwhile, a vengeful ex-con whom McQuaid put away is now out on parole, while McQuaid himself is called out of town for a few days. There's action and murder, but the overall effect is still as comforting and enjoyable as a cup of steaming mint tea on a chilly winter's night. (Berkley, \$19.95)

It took chutzpah to conceive of a mystery penned by the hand of that beloved literary light Jane Austen. Fortunately, author Stephanie Barron's boldness is matched by enormous talent. The result is **Jane and the Unpleasantness at Scargrave Manor** (Bantam, \$19.95), a stylish period mystery replete with titled lords, a modest gentlewoman in distress, a country house murder, and a domestic scandal that threatens to erupt at any moment, shaking the foundations of "society." Best of all, as Jane details her investigation and adventures in letters to her sister, this reader found it possible to suspend disbelief and experience the joy of an unread Austen "memoir." What splendid fun!

If you haven't gone out on a case with Jerome Doolittle's reluctant private eye Tom Bethany, then **Kill Story** (Pocket, \$22) offers a splendid opportunity to do so. Bethany comes with a lot of baggage and more than a few scintillating hints about his past activities, but his current involvement with a multimillionaire publishing mogul is the direct result of a request from a friend. It seems that Boucher (mystery fans should appreciate the author's choice of surname) has bought a local rag from a publisher's widow with the contractual stipulations that he maintain its integrity and retain its staff. He soon breaks both promises, and the former owner apparently commits suicide in despair. Or did she? *Kill Story* has lots of good dialogue and some rollicking action scenes. Try it; you'll like it.

Edgar Award winner Laurie R. King reprises her estimable police detective Kate Martinelli in **With Child** (St. Martin's, \$21.95). It gets off to a roaring start when a teenage girl in her care disappears as Kate is battling one of her migraines. Already emotionally stressed by the absence of her lover Lee, Kate becomes obsessed with locating the girl, heedless of jurisdiction, the media's linking the "lesbian cop" to the disappearance, even her friend and partner Al's sound advice. King is a terrific writer, managing to lend suspense and import to every detail of Kate's life, be it private, professional, or all-too-public. The missing girl is a character whom we care about, and as Kate digs around in the girl's secrets, the reader becomes unbearably anxious about her welfare. Any reader who appreciates a loyal and resourceful female sleuth will undoubtedly join Kate Martinelli's booster club.

If you're looking for hardboiled, you need look no further than Steven Womack's latest, **Chain of Fools** (Ballantine, \$5.99). Nashville P.I. Harry James Denton has been around a few blocks, but this case is going to drag him into darker areas on the map of the human heart. A wealthy general's daughter hires Harry to locate her much younger sister, a wild teenager whose absence the woman is hiding from her parents. Screwy perhaps, but not as twisted as the path Harry must follow to locate young Stacey, who has reportedly embraced the world of hard drugs and hard-core with equal abandon. Throw in a mobster with a sadist in his employ, several shocking secrets his client has neglected to mention, and Harry's increasing discomfort with the entire seedy situation—not to mention a few rough spots in his own path of true love—and you have a memorable mean-streets tale.

If, however, a bonbon of a book is more to your taste, you might sample Anne George's debut mystery, **Murder on a Girls' Night Out** (Avon, \$5.50). They may be in their sixties, but Patricia Anne (nicknamed "Mouse") and sister Mary Alice continue to bicker and badger in time-honored sibling fashion. Mary Alice, oft-widowed and zaftig with a larger-than-life personality to match, has impulsively bought a country and western bar, complete with dance floor and light show. Patricia Anne, happily married to the same (some might say boring) dear husband and content in her role of housewife, has little doubt that her sister's latest escapade will turn even more of her hairs gray. Neither of them, however, expects to find a dead body as part of the deal. Fans of Joan Hess might well appreciate the squabbling sisters on their witty and wildly improbable first case.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The January Mysterious won by J. F. Peirce of Bryan, go to Martha Ann Robertson ny M. Duffy of Burbank, of Livingston, New Jersey; bad, California; Dana L. R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Al-Carter of Ithaca; New York; Jackie Wan of Hercules, Georgia; Heather Rayner of Litchfield Park, Arizona; and Nils V. Bockmann of Centerville, Massachusetts.



Photograph contest was Texas. Honorable mentions of Rocky Face, Georgia; Jon-California; Bernice F. Weiss Avonelle Kelsey of Carls-Swanson of Darien, Illinois; berta, Canada; Shana Carter of Ithaca, Georgia; Heather Rayner of Litchfield Park, Arizona; and Nils V. Bockmann of Centerville, Massachusetts.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

## THE MAGIC CIRCLE by J. F. Peirce

Neither any of the other members of the tour "In Search of God and the Devil" nor I told the police about Horace Crock's disappearance. They wouldn't have believed us.

You can count on having one person on a tour who's obnoxious. Horace was ours. By the second day we knew who the Devil was. Horace! He was loud, profane, vulgar, nasty, and obscene. And those were his good qualities. His wife Marcy was nice. Most obnoxious people have nice spouses. Tell me why.

After we visited the twentieth or two hundredth cathedral, Boris, our tour guide, who entertained us with magic, took us beyond the gate and showed us a series of intertwined circles he called Satan's Target and persuaded Horace to stand in the middle.

"You're a nonbeliever, Horace?" he said.

"I don't believe in a god or a devil," Horace replied.

"Why did you come on this tour, then?"

"To prove to Marcy there is no god. If there were, he would have struck me dead for blasphemy." Horace had blasphemed in every cathedral we had visited while Marcy tried to shush him.

"Though you're in the center of Satan's Target," Boris said, "you wouldn't be afraid to say, 'I defy you, Satan!'"

Horace shouted out the words, and *poof*, he was gone.

I never learned how he disappeared, but I learned why.

After the tour, Marcy disappeared, too. With Boris.

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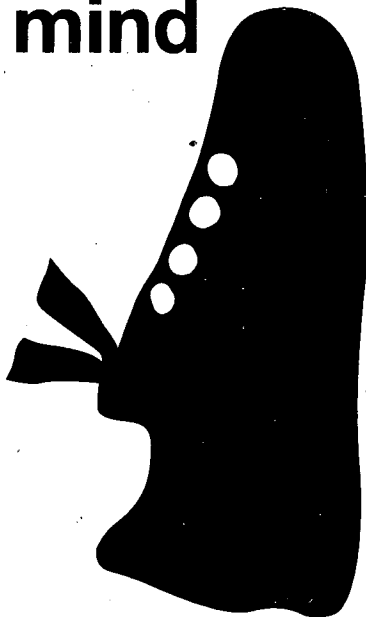
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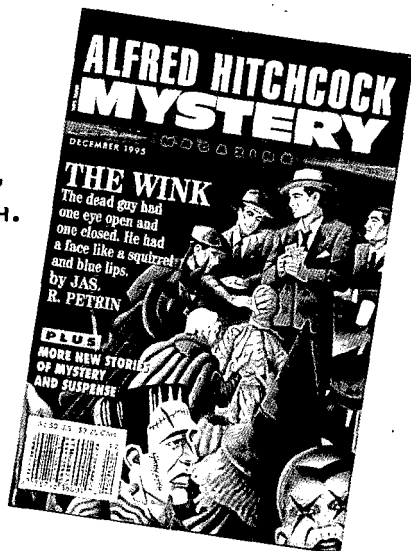
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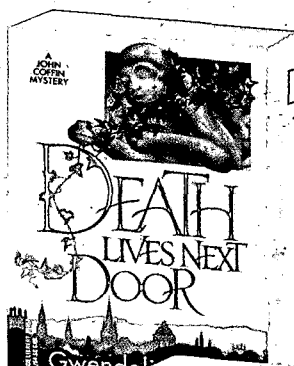
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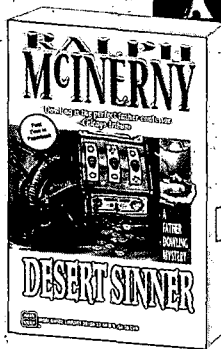
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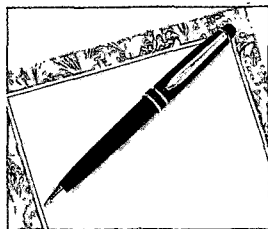
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